MARGARET MONTFORT

BY LAURA E. RICHARDS

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MARGARET MONTFORT

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BY

LAURA E. RICHARDS

AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN JANUARY," "MELODY,"
"QUEEN HILDEGARDE," ETC.

Illustrated by

ETHELDRED B. BARRY

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MARGARET MONTFORT.

CHAPTER I.

PRESENT AND ABSENT.

"It shall be exactly as you please, my dear!" said Mr. Montfort. "I have no wish in the matter, save to fulfil yours. I had thought it would be pleasanter, perhaps, to have the rooms occupied; but your feeling is most natural, and there is no reason why you should not keep your present room."

"Thank you, uncle!" said the girl whom he addressed as Margaret, and whom some of my readers may have met before. "It is not that I don't love the dear rooms, nor that it would not be a joy to be in them, for some reasons; but,—I think, just to go and sit there every day, alone or with you, and think

about her, — it seems as if that would be easier just now, dear uncle. You always understand, Uncle John!"

Mr. Montfort nodded, and puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. The two, uncle and niece, were sitting on the wide verandah of Fernley House; it was a soft, fair June evening, and the fireflies were flitting through the trees, and one or two late birds were chirping drowsily. There were only the two of them at Fernley now, for one day, some two months ago, the beloved Aunt Faith had fallen quietly asleep, and passed in sleep away from age and weakness and weariness. Margaret missed her sadly indeed; but there was no bitterness in her grieving, and she felt all the more need of keeping the house cheerful and bright for her uncle, who had lost the faithful and affectionate friend who had been for years like a second mother to him. They talked of her a great deal, of the beauty and helpfulness of the long life that had brought so much joy to others; just now Mr. Montfort had proposed that Margaret should occupy the White Rooms, which had been Mrs. Cheriton's

special apartments in the great rambling house; but he did not urge the matter, and they sat in silence for a time, feeling the soft beauty of the evening wrap them round like a garment of rest.

"And what have you been doing all day, while I was in town?" asked Mr. Montfort presently. "You were not too lonely, May Margaret?"

"Oh, no, not a bit too lonely; just enough to make it very good to have one's Uncle John come back. Let me see! After you went, I fed Chiquito, and stayed with him quite a while, talking and singing. He is so pitiful, poor old fellow! Then I took a walk, and dropped in to see how Mrs. Peyton was; she asked me to come in the morning, you know, when I could."

"And how was she? Superb as ever?"

"Just, Uncle John! Her dressing-jacket was blue this time, and there was a new kind of lace on her pillows."

"Oh! she has lace on her pillows, has she, my dear?"

"Didn't I tell you, uncle? Pillows and

sheets are trimmed with real lace, most magnificent. To-day it was Valenciennes, really lovely Valenciennes, to match her cap and the frills on her jacket. And turquoise buttons and cap-pins; oh, she was a vision of beauty, I assure you. The pale pink roses on the table by her bed gave just the right touch to accentuate — if that is what I mean — all the blue. She is an artist in effects. She must have been very beautiful, Uncle John? She is beautiful now, of course, only so worn and fragile."

"Yes, she was extremely beautiful, in her way," said Mr. Montfort; "and she was always, as you say, an artist in effects. And in a good many other things," he murmured, half under his breath. "She was glad to see you, no doubt, my child?"

"Oh, yes; she is always most cordial and kind. She made me tell her just how you were looking, — she always does that; and what you were doing."

"Emily Peyton is a singular woman," said Mr. Montfort, thoughtfully. "She suffers, no doubt, and I am glad if you can be a comfort

to her, Margaret; but be a little careful, my dear; be a little careful with Mrs. Peyton! H'm! ha! yes, my love! and what else did you say you had done to amuse yourself?"

"Why, Uncle John, do you think I have to be amusing myself all day? What a frivolous creature you must think me! I practised after I came home; and then I had lunch, and then I arranged the flowers, and then I made some buttonholes, and all the rest of the afternoon I sat under the big tulip-tree, reading 'Henry Esmond.' So you see, I have really had the most delightful day, Uncle John."

"Especially the last part of it," said her uncle, smiling. "Esmond was rather more delightful than the buttonholes, eh, Meg?"

"Well, possibly!" Margaret admitted. "He is rather more delightful than almost anything else, isn't he? But not half so good as one's Uncle John, when he comes home in the gloaming, with his pockets full of bonbons and letters for his unworthy niece."

"Flatterer!" said Mr. Montfort. "Does this come of visiting Mrs. Peyton? She used

to be an adept in the art. But what do our two other Margarets say? Has Peggy set the prairies on fire yet? She will some day, you know."

"Do you think the mosquitoes would quite devour us if I brought the small lamp out here? I really must read you the letters, and it is too lovely to go in. Shall I try?"

Margaret brought the lamp, and, drawing a letter from her pocket, began to read:

"DARLING MARGARET:

"I was so glad to get your letter. It was splendid, and I'm going to copy out a lot of the things you said, and pin them up by my looking-glass. My hair *will not* part straight, because I have the most frightful cowlick —

"I don't believe you care for this part, do you, Uncle John? Poor little Peggy's difficulties are very funny sometimes."

"Why, I like it all, Meg, if you think Peggy would not mind my hearing it. It is all sweet and wholesome, I know; but leave out anything you think I should not hear."

"Oh, there isn't anything, really. I'll go on, if you like. Where was I? Oh!—

"The most frightful cowlick. The reason I tried was because you said my forehead was nice. I hope you will not think me very vain, Margaret. And you know, no one is wearing bangs any more, not even curly ones. So I have put it straight back now, and Pa likes it, and says I look like his mother. Margaret, will you try to get me the receipt for barley soup, the way Frances makes it? Mother isn't well, and I thought I would try if I could make some. I think, Margaret, that I am going to find something I can really do! I think it is cooking! What do you think of that? Our cook went away to her brother's wedding last week, and Mother was sick, and so I tried; and Pa (I tried saying Father, but he wouldn't let me!) said the things tasted good, and I had a knack for flavouring. That made me feel so happy, Margaret! Because I had just gone ahead till I thought a thing tasted right. I did not want to be bothering 'round with cook-books, and besides, ours was lost, for Betsy can't read, so there was no use for one. I made an apple-pudding yesterday, and Pa had two helps, and all the boys wanted three, but there wasn't enough, though I made it in the big meat-pie pan. Darling Margaret, do please write again very soon, and tell me about everything at dear,

darling Fernley. How is Chiquito, and does Uncle John ever speak of me? I miss him dreadfully, but I miss you most of all, darling Margaret, — I never get over missing you. I have a new dog, a setter, a perfect beauty. I asked Hugh to name him for me, and he named him Hamlet, because he was black and white, and Hugh thought he was going to be melancholy, but he grins and wiggles all over every time you look at him. I am teaching him to jump over a stick and he does it beautifully, — only the other day I stood too near the looking-glass, and he jumped into that, and smashed it, and frightened himself almost to death, poor puppy. Margaret, I read a little history every day, — not very much, but I think of you when I read it, and that makes it better. Pa says I am going to school next year; won't that be fun? Hugh is reading 'John Brent' to me in the evenings. Oh, how perfectly splendid it is! If I had a horse like Fulano, I would live with him all the time, and never leave him for five minutes. I want dreadfully to go out west and find Luggernel Alley. Hugh says perhaps we shall go some day, just him and me. That doesn't look right, Margaret, but I tried writing 'he and I' on a piece of paper, and it didn't look any better, so I guess I'll leave it as it is. Do you think I write better? I am trying to take a lot of pains. I try to think of all the things you tell me, dear Margaret. Mother thinks I am doing better, I know. Mother and I have real

good talks together, like we never used to before, and she tells me what she used to do when she was a girl. I guess she had some pretty hard times. I guess I'm a pretty lucky girl, Margaret. Now I must go and get mother's supper. Give lots and lots of love to Uncle John, and some to Elizabeth and Frances, and say — I can't spell it, but the Spanish thing I learned — to poor Chiquito. But most love of all to your own, dear, darling self, Margaret, from

"PEGGY."

Mr. Montfort curled his moustaches in silence for some minutes, when the reading was over.

"Dear little girl!" he said at last. "Good little Peggy! So she will learn to cook, will she? And she is getting hold of her mother! This is as it should be, Margaret, eh?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Margaret. "Oh, Uncle John, this letter makes me feel so happy about the child. At first, you know, she missed us all more than she should have, — really. And — and I think that, except for Hugh, perhaps they did not receive her in quite the way they might have, laughing at her a good deal, and sneering when she tried to make little improvements. I don't

mean Aunt Susan or Uncle James, but the younger children, and George, who must be — whom I don't fancy, somehow. And she has been so brave, and has tried so hard to be patient and gentle. I think our Peggy will make a very fine woman, don't you, uncle?"

"I do, my love. I have a great tenderness for Peggy. When she is at school, she must come here for her vacations, or some of them, at least."

"And she owes this all to you!" cried Margaret, with shining eyes. "If she had never come here, Uncle John, I feel as if she might have grown up — well, pretty wild and rough, I am afraid. Oh, she ought to love you, and she does."

"Humph!" said Mr. Montfort, dryly. "Yes, my dear, she does, and I am very glad of the dear little girl's love. But as for owing it all to me, why, Margaret, there may be two opinions about that. Well, and what says our Bird of Paradise?"

"Rita? Oh, uncle, I don't know what you will think of this letter."

"Don't read it, my dear, if you think it is meant for you alone. You can tell me if she is well and happy."

"That is just it, Uncle John. She wants to go to Europe, and her father does not approve of her going just at present, and so — well, you shall hear part of it, at any rate.

"Margaret, my Soul!"

"That sounds natural!" said Mr. Montfort. "That is undoubtedly Rita, Margaret; go on! If you were her soul, my dear, my brother Richard would have a quieter life. Go on."

"Hardly a week has passed since last I wrote, yet to-night I fly again in spirit to you, since my burning heart must pour itself out to some other heart that can beat with mine. It is midnight. All day I have suffered, and now I fain would lose myself in sleep. But no! My eyes are propped open, my heart throbs to suffocation, I enrage, I tear myself — how should sleep come to such as I? O Marguerite, there in your cool retreat, with that best of men, my uncle, — yours also, — a Paladin, but one whose blood flows, or rests, quietly, as yours, can you feel for me, for your Rita, who burns, who dissolves in anguish? Listen! I desire to go to Europe. I have

never seen it, as you know. Spain, the home of my ancestors, the cradle of the San Reals, is but a name to me. Now I have the opportunity. An escort offers itself, perfection, beyond earthly desire. You recall my friend, my Conchita, who divides my heart with you? She is married, my dear! She is the Señora Bobadilla; her husband is noble, rich, devoted. Young, I do not say; brilliant, I do not pretend! Conchita is brought up in the Spanish way, my child; she weds a Spanish husband, as her parents provide him; it is the custom. Now! Marguerite, they offer to take me with them to Spain, to France, Italy, the world's end. It is the opportunity of a lifetime. I pine, I die for change. When you consider that I have been a year here, without once leaving home, — it is an eternity! I implore my father; I weep — torrents! I clasp his knees. I say, 'Kill me, but let me go!' No! he is adamant. He talks about the disturbed state of the country! Has it been ever undisturbed? I ask you, Marguerite! Briefly, I remain! The Bobadillas sail to-morrow, without me. I feel that this blow has crushed me, Marguerite. I feel my strength, never, as you know, robust, ebbing from me. Be prepared, Marguerite! I feel that in a few weeks I may be gone, indeed, but not to Europe; to another and a kinder world. The San Reals are a short-lived race; they suffer, they die! My father will realise one day that he might better have let his poor Rita have her way for once, when Rita lies

shrouded in white, with lilies at her head and feet. Adios, Marguerite! farewell, heart of my heart! I have made my will, — my jewels are divided between you and Peggy. Poor Peggy! she also will mourn me. You will dry her tears, dearest! The lamp burns low — no more! For the last time, beloved Marguerite,

"Your unhappy
"MARGARITA MARIA DOLORES DE
SAN REAL MONTFORT."

"Isn't that really pretty alarming?" said Margaret, looking up. "Why — why, Uncle John! you are laughing! Don't laugh, please! Of course Rita is extravagant, but I am afraid she must really be very unhappy. Stay! Here is a postscript that I did not see before. Oh! Oh, uncle! Listen!

"Alma mia, one word! It is morning, in the world and in my heart. I go, Marguerite! My maid is packing my trunk at this instant. My father relents; he is an angel, the kindest, the most considerate of parents. We sail to-morrow for Gibraltar, — I shall be in Madrid in less than a month. Marguerite, I embrace you tenderly. Rejoice, Beloved, with your happy, your devoted

"RITA."

"Thank you, my dear!" said Mr. Montfort, twirling his moustaches. "Poor Richard! Poor old Dick! Do you know, my dear, I think Dick may have had some experience of life."

CHAPTER II.

DOMESTIC.

Life was pleasant enough for Margaret Montfort, in those days. The hours were still sad which she had been used to spend with Mrs. Cheriton, the beloved Aunt Faith; but there was such peace and blessedness in the thought of her, that Margaret would not have been without the gentle sorrow. She loved to sit in the White Rooms, sometimes with her uncle, but more often alone. In the morning, she generally walked for an hour in the garden with Mr. Montfort, tending the rose-bushes that were his special care and pride, listening to his wise and kindly talk, and learning, she always thought, something new each day. It is wonderful how much philosophy, poetry, even history, can be brought into the care of roses, if the right

person has charge of them. At ten o'clock he generally went to town, and the rest of the morning was spent in practising, sewing, and studying; the hours flew by so fast, Margaret often suspected the clock of being something of a dishonest character. She was studying German, with the delightful result of reading "Der Trompeter von Säkkingen" with her uncle in the evening, when it was not too beautiful out-of-doors. Then, in the afternoon, she could with a clear conscience take up some beloved romance, and be "just happy," as she called it, till Mr. Montfort returned in time for the walk or ride which was the crowning pleasure of the day. And so the days went by, in a golden peace which seemed too pleasant to last; and yet there seemed no reason why it should ever change.

The morning after the reading of the letters, Margaret had been in the White Rooms, arranging flowers in the vases, and putting little loving touches to books and cushions, as a tidy girl loves to do, whether there is need or not. The windows were open, and the orioles were singing in the

great elm-tree, and the laburnum was a bower of gold. It seemed really too perfect a morning to spend in the house; Margaret thought she would take her work out into the garden, not this sunny green parlour, but the great shady garden outside, where the box swept above her head, and the whole air smelt of it, and of moss and ferns and a hundred other cool things. She passed out of the rooms, and went along a passage, and as she went she heard voices that came through an open door at one side; clear, loud voices that she could not have escaped if she would.

"These table-napkins is scandalous!" said Elizabeth. "I do wish Miss Margaret would get us some new ones."

"Why don't you ask her?" said Frances, the cook, bringing her flat-iron down with a thump. "The table-cloths is most worn out, too, this set. Ask her to see to some new ones. She's young, you see, and she don't think."

"I've been giving her one with holes in it, right along this two weeks," said Elizabeth, "hoping she'd notice, but she don't seem to.

I thought it'd be best if she found out herself when things was needed."

"Ah!" said Frances, "she's a sweet young lady, but she'll never make no housekeeper. She hasn't so much as looked inside one of my closets since Mis' Cheriton went."

"You wouldn't be over and above pleased if she looked much into your closets, Frances; I know that!"

"Maybe I wouldn't, and maybe I would; but I'd like to have her know as there was no need of her looking. Don't tell me, Elizabeth! So long as she could walk on her feet, never a week but Mis' Cheriton would look in, and take a peep at every shelf. 'Just for the pleasure of seeing perfection, Frances,' she'd say, or something like that, her pretty way. But if there had been anything *but* perfection, I'd have heard from her pretty quick."

"I think you're hard to please, I do!" Elizabeth answered. "I think Miss Margaret is as sweet a young lady as walks the earth; so thoughtful, and afraid of giving trouble, and neat and tidy as a pin. I tell you, Mr.

Montfort's well off, and so's you and me, Frances. Why, we might have had one of them other young ladies, and then where'd we have been?"

"I don't know!" said Frances, significantly. "Not here, that's one sure thing."

"Or Mr. Montfort might have married. Fine man as he is, it's a wonder he never has."

"H'm! he's no such fool! Not but what there's them would be glad enough —"

But here Margaret, with burning cheeks, fled back to the White Rooms. It could not be helped; she had to hear what they were saying about herself; she must not hear what they said about her uncle.

She sat down on the little stool that had always been her favourite seat, and leaned her cheek against the great white chair, that would always be empty now.

"I wish you were here, Aunt Faith!" she said, aloud. "I am very young, and very ignorant. I wish you were here to tell me what I should do."

At first the women's talk seemed cruel to

her. They had been here so long, they knew the ways of the house so entirely, she had never dreamed of advising them, any more than of advising her uncle himself. Frances had been at Fernley twenty years, Elizabeth, twenty-five. What could she tell them? How could she possibly know about the things that had been their care and pride, year in and year out, since before she was born? It seemed very strange, very unkind, that they should expect her to step in, with her youth and ignorance, between them and their experience. So she thought, and thought, feeling hot, and sore, and angry. She had never had any care of housekeeping in her life. Old Katy, her nurse, who had taken her from her dying mother's arms, had always done all that; Margaret's part was to see that her own and her father's clothes were in perfect order, to keep the rooms dusted, and arrange the books when she was allowed to touch them, which was not often. As to table-cloths, she had never thought of them in her life; Katy saw to all that; and if she

had attempted to suggest ordering dinner, Katy would have been apt to send her to bed, Margaret thought. Poor, dear old Katy! She was dead now, and Aunt Faith was dead, and there was no one to stand between Margaret and the cares that she knew nothing about. Of course, Uncle John must never know anything of it; he expected perfection, and had always had it; he did not care how it was brought about. Surely these women were unkind and unreasonable! What good could she possibly do by interfering? They would not endure it if she really did interfere.

The white linen cover of the chair was smooth and cool; Margaret pressed her cheek against it, and a sense of comfort stole over her insensibly. She began to turn the matter over, and try to look at the other side of it. There always was another side; her father had taught her that when she was a little child. Well, after all, had they really said anything unkind? Frances's words came back to her, "I'd like to have her know as there was no need of her looking."

After all, was not that perfectly natural? Did not every one like to have good work seen and recognised? Even Uncle John always called her to see when he had made a particularly neat graft, and expected her praise and wonderment, and was pleased with it. And why did she show him her buttonholes this morning, except that she knew they were good buttonholes, and wanted the kindly word that she was sure of getting? Was the trouble with her, after all? Had she failed to remember that Elizabeth and Frances were human beings, not machines, and that her uncle being what he was, she herself was the only person to give them a word of deserved praise or counsel.

"My dear," she said to herself, "I don't want to be hasty in my judgments, but it rather looks as if you had been a careless, selfish goose, doesn't it now?"

She went up to her own room,—the garden seemed too much of an indulgence just now,—and sat down quietly with her work. Sewing was always soothing to Margaret. She was not fond of it; she would have read

twelve hours out of the twenty-four, if she had been allowed to choose her own way of life, and have walked or ridden four, and slept six, and would never have thought of any time being necessary for eating, till she felt hungry. But she had been taught to sew well and quickly, and she had always made her own underclothes, and felled all the seams, and a good many girls will know how much that means. She sat sewing and thinking, planning all kinds of reforms and experiments, when she heard Elizabeth stirring in the room next hers. It was the linen room, and Elizabeth was putting away clean clothes, Margaret knew by the clank of the drawer-handles. Now! this was the moment to begin. She laid down her work, and went into the linen room.

"May I see you put them away, Elizabeth?" she asked. "I always like to see your piles of towels, — they are so even and smooth."

Elizabeth looked up, and her face brightened. "And welcome, Miss Margaret!" she said. "I'll be pleased enough. 'Tis dreadful

lonesome, and Mis' Cheriton gone. Not that she could come up here, I don't mean; but I always knew she was there, and she was like a mother to me, and I could always go to her. Yes, miss, the towels do look nice, and I love to keep 'em so."

"They are beautiful!" said Margaret, with genuine enthusiasm, for the shelves and drawers were like those she had read about in "Soll und Haben." She had loved them in the book, but never thought of looking at them in reality. "Oh, what lovely damask this is, Elizabeth! It shines like silver! I never saw such damask as this."

"'Tis something rare, miss, I do be told," Elizabeth replied.

"Mr. Montfort brought them towels back from Germany, three years ago, because he thought they would please his aunt, and they did, dear lady. Hand spun and wove they are, she said; and there's only one place where they make this weave and this pattern. See, Miss Margaret! 'Tis roses, coming out of a little loaf of bread like; and there was a story about it, some saint, but I don't

rightly remember what. There! I have tried to remember that story, ever since Mis' Cheriton went, but it seems I can't."

"Oh, oh, it must be Saint Elizabeth of Hungary!" cried Margaret, bending in delight over the smooth silvery stuff. "Why, how perfectly enchanting!"

"Yes, miss, that's it!" cried Elizabeth, beaming with pleasure. "Saint Elizabeth it was; and maybe you'll know the story, Miss Margaret. I never like to ask Mr. Montfort, of course, but I should love dearly to hear it."

Margaret asked nothing better. She told the lovely story as well as she knew how, and before she had finished, Elizabeth's eyes as well as her own were full of tears. One of Elizabeth's tears even fell on the towel, and she cried out in horror, and wiped it away as if it had been a poison-spot, and laid the sacred damask back in its place. Margaret felt the moment given to her.

"Elizabeth," she said, "I want to ask you something. I want to ask if you will help me a little. Will you try?"

Elizabeth, surprised and pleased, vowed she

would do all she could for Miss Margaret, in any way in her power.

"You can do a great deal!" said Margaret. "I — I am very young, Elizabeth, and — and you and Frances have been here a long time, and of course you know all about the work of the house, and I know nothing at all. And yet — and yet, I ought to be helping, it seems to me, and ought to be taking my place, and my share in the work. Do you see what I mean, Elizabeth? You and Frances could help me, oh, so much, if you would; and perhaps some day I might be able to help you too, — I don't know just how, yet, but it might come."

"Oh, miss, we will be so thankful!" cried Elizabeth. "Oh, miss, Frances and me, we'd been wishing and longing to have you speak up and take your place, if I may say so. We didn't like to put ourselves forward, and we've no orders from Mr. Montfort, except to do whatever you said; and so, when you'll say anything, Miss Margaret, we feel ever and ever so much better, Frances and me. And I'll be pleased to go all over the work with you, Miss Margaret, this very day, and show

you just how I've always done it, and I think Mr. Montfort has been satisfied, and Mis' Cheriton was, Lord rest her! and you so young, and with so much else to do, as I said time and again to Frances, reading with Mr. Montfort and riding with him, and taking such an interest in the roses, as his own daughter couldn't make him happier if he had one. And of course it's nature that you haven't had no time yet to take much notice, but it makes it twice as easy for servants, Miss Margaret, where an interest is took; and I'm thankful to you, I'm sure, and so will Frances be, and you'll find her closets a pleasure to look at."

Elizabeth stopped to draw breath, and Margaret looked at her in wonder and self-reproach. The grave, staid woman was all alight with pleasure and the prospect of sympathy. It came over Margaret that, comfortable and homelike as their life at Fernley was, it was not perhaps exactly thrilling.

"We will be friends, Elizabeth!" she said, simply; and the two shook hands, with an earnestness that meant something. "And

you are to come to me, please, whenever there is anything that needs attention, Elizabeth, and I will do my best, and ask your advice about anything I don't understand. Don't — don't we — need some new napkins, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth was eloquent as to their need of napkins. In a couple of washes more, there would be nothing but holes left to wipe their hands on.

"Then I'll order some this very day," said Margaret. "Or better still, I'll go to town with Uncle John to-morrow, and get them myself. And now, Elizabeth, I am going down to see Frances, and — and perhaps — do you think she would like it if I ordered dinner, Elizabeth?"

"Miss Margaret, she'd be pleased to death!" cried Elizabeth.

Returning from the kitchen an hour later, a sadder and a wiser girl (for Frances's perfection seemed unattainable by ordinary mortals, even with the aid of Sapolio), Margaret heard the sound of wheels on the gravel outside. Glancing through the window of the long

passage through which she was going, she saw, to her amazement, a carriage standing at the door, a carriage that had evidently come some way, for it was covered with dust. The driver was taking down a couple of trunks, and beside the carriage stood a lady, with her purse in her hand.

"I shall give you two dollars!" the lady was saying, in a thin, sharp voice. "I consider that ample for the distance you have come."

"I told the gentleman it would be three dollars, mum!" said the man, civilly, touching his hat. "Three dollars is the regular price, with one trunk, and these trunks is mortal heavy. The gentleman said as it would be all right, mum."

"The gentleman knew nothing whatever about it," said the sharp-voiced lady. "I shall give you two dollars, and not a penny more. I have always paid two dollars to drive to Fernley, and I have no idea of being cheated now, I assure you."

The man was still grumbling, when Elizabeth opened the door. She looked grave,

but greeted the newcomer with a respectful curtsey.

"Oh, how do you do, Elizabeth!" said the strange lady. "How is Mr. Montfort?"

"Mr. Montfort is very well, thank you, mum!" said Elizabeth. "He is in town, mum. He'll hardly be back before evening. Would you like to see Miss Montfort?"

"Miss Montfort? Oh, the little girl who is staying here. You needn't trouble to call her just now, Elizabeth. Send for Willis, will you, and have him take my trunks in; I have come to stay. He may put them in the White Rooms."

"I — I beg pardon, mum!" faltered Elizabeth. "In the Blue Room, did you say? The Blue Room has been new done over, and that is where we have put visitors lately."

"Nothing of the sort!" said the lady, sharply. "I said the White Rooms; Mrs. Cheriton's rooms."

Margaret stayed to hear no more. A stranger in the White Rooms! Aunt Faith's rooms, which she could not bear to occupy

herself, though her uncle had urged her to do so? And such a stranger as this, with such a voice, — and such a nose! Never! never, while there was breath to pant with, while there were feet to run with!

Never but once in her life had Margaret Montfort run as she did now; that once was when she flew up the secret staircase to save her cousin from burning. In a flash she was in her own room — what had been her room! — gathering things frantically in her arms, snatching books from the table, dresses from the closets. Down the back stairs she ran like a whirlwind; down, and up, and down again. Had the girl gone suddenly mad?

Ten minutes later, when Elizabeth, her eyes smarting with angry tears, opened the door of the White Parlour, — Willis the choreman behind her, grunting and growling, with a trunk on his shoulder, — a young lady was sitting in the great white armchair, quietly reading. The young lady's cheeks were crimson, her eyes were sparkling, and her breath came in short, quick gasps, which showed that what she was reading must be very exciting; what made

it the more curious was that the book was upside down. But she was entirely composed, and evidently surprised at the sudden intrusion.

"What is it, Elizabeth?" asked Margaret, quietly.

"I — I — I beg your pardon, Miss Montfort!" said Elizabeth, whose eyes were beginning to brighten, too, and her lips to twitch dangerously. "I — I didn't know, miss, as you had — moved in yet. Here is Miss Sophronia Montfort, miss, as perhaps you would like to see her."

The strange lady was already glaring over Willis's shoulder.

"What is this?" she said. "What does this mean? These rooms are not occupied; I was positively told they were not occupied. There must be some mistake. Willis — "

"Yes, there is a mistake!" said Margaret, coming forward, and holding out her hand with a smile. "Is this Cousin Sophronia? I am Margaret, Cousin Sophronia. Uncle John asked me to take these rooms, and I — I feel quite at home in them already. Would you

like the Pink, or the Blue Room? They are both ready, aren't they, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, Miss Montfort," said Elizabeth, "quite ready."

The strange lady's eyes glared wider and wider; her chest heaved; she seemed about to break out in a torrent of angry speech; but making a visible effort, she controlled herself. "How do you do, my — my dear?" she said, taking Margaret's offered hand, and giving it a little pinch with the tips of her fingers. "I — a little misunderstanding, no doubt. Willis, — the Blue Room, — for the present!" But Willis was suffering from a sudden and violent fit of coughing, which shook his whole frame, and made it necessary for him to rest his trunk against the wall and lean against it, with his head down; so that it was fully five minutes before Miss Sophronia Montfort's trunk got up to the Blue Room.

CHAPTER III.

THE UNEXPECTED.

When Mr. Montfort came home that afternoon, Margaret was waiting for him, as usual, on the verandah; as usual, for she was determined to keep the worry out of her face and out of her voice. But as her uncle came up the steps, with his cheery "Well! and how's my lassie?" he was confronted by Miss Sophronia Montfort, who, passing Margaret swiftly, advanced with both hands held out, and a beaming smile.

"My dearest John! my poor, dear fellow! Confess that I have surprised you. Confess it, John! — you did not expect to see me."

"Sophronia!" exclaimed Mr. Montfort. He stood still and contemplated the visitor for a moment; then he shook hands with her, rather formally.

"You certainly have surprised me, Sophro-

nia!" he said, kindly enough. "What wind has blown you in this direction?"

"The wind of affection, my dear boy!" cried the strange lady. "I have been planning it, ever since I heard of Aunt Faith's death. Dearest Aunt Faith! What a loss, John! what an irreparable loss! I shall never recover from the shock. The moment I heard of it, I said — William would tell you, if he were here — I said, 'I must go to John! He will need me now,' I said, 'and go I must.' I explained to William that I felt it as a solemn duty. He took it beautifully, poor, dear fellow. I don't know how they will get on without me, for his wife is sadly heedless, John, and the children need a steady hand, they do indeed. But he did not try to keep me back; indeed, he urged me to come, which showed such a beautiful spirit, didn't it? And so here I am, my dearest boy, come to take Aunt Faith's place, and make a home for you, my poor lonely cousin. You know I have always loved you as a sister, John, and you must consider me a real sister now; sister Sophronia, dear John!"

The lady paused for breath, and gazed tenderly on Mr. Montfort; that gentleman returned her gaze with one of steady gravity.

"I shall be glad to have a visit from you, Sophronia," he said. "I have no doubt we can make you comfortable for a few weeks; I can hardly suppose that William can spare you longer than that. We have no children here to need your — your ministrations."

The lady shook her head playfully; she had thin curls of a grayish yellow, which almost rattled when she shook her head.

"Always self-denying, John!" she cried. "The same unselfish, good, sterling fellow! But I understand, my friend; I know how it really is, and I shall do my duty, and stand by you; depend upon that! And this dear child, too!" she added, turning to Margaret and taking her hand affectionately. "So young, so unexperienced! and to be attempting the care of a house like Fernley! How could you think of it, John? But we will make that all right. I shall be — we can hardly say a mother, can we, my dear? but an elder sister, to you, too. Oh, we shall be

very happy, I am sure. The drawing-room carpets are looking very shabby, John. I am ready to go over the dear old house from top to bottom, and make it over new; of course you did not feel like making any changes while dear Aunt Faith was with you. Such a mistake, I always say, to shake the aged out of their ruts. Yes! so wise of you! and who is in the neighbourhood, John?"

"I hardly know," said Mr. Montfort. "You know I live rather a hermit life, Sophronia. Mrs. Peyton is here; I believe you are fond of her."

"Sweet Emily Peyton!" exclaimed Miss Sophronia, with enthusiasm. "Is that exquisite creature here? That will indeed be a pleasure. Ah, John, she should never have been Emily Peyton; you know my opinion on that point." She nodded her head several times, with an air of mysterious understanding. "And widowed, after all, and once more alone in the world. How does she bear her sorrow, John?"

"I have not seen her," said Mr. Montfort, rather shortly. "From what I hear, she

seems to bear it with considerable fortitude. Perhaps you forget that it is fully ten years since Mr. Peyton died, Sophronia. But Margaret here can tell you more than I can about Mrs. Peyton; she goes to see her now and then. Mrs. Peyton is something of an invalid, and likes to have her come."

"Indeed!" cried Miss Sophronia. "I should hardly have fancied — Emily Peyton was always so mature in her thought, so critical in her observations; but no doubt she is lonely, and glad of any society; and sweet Margaret is most sympathetic, I am sure. Sympathy, my dear John! how could we live without it, my poor dear fellow?"

"I am going to walk," said Mr. Montfort, abruptly. "Margaret, will you come? Sophronia, you will be glad of a chance to rest; you must be tired after your long drive."

"This once, yes, dearest John!" said the lady. "This once you must go without me. I am tired, — so thoughtful of you to notice it! There is no sofa in the Blue Room, but I shall do very well there for a few days. Don't have me on your mind in the least,

my dear cousin; I shall soon be absolutely at home. Enjoy your walk, both of you! After to-day, I shall always be with you, I hope. I ordered tea an hour earlier, as I dined early, and I knew you would not mind. Good-bye!" and the lady nodded, and smiled herself into the house.

Margaret went for her hat in silence, and in silence she and her uncle walked along. Mr. Montfort was smoking, not in his usual calm and dignified manner, but in short, fierce puffs; smoking fast and violently. Margaret did not dare to speak, and they walked a mile or more without exchanging a word.

"Margaret," said her uncle, at last.

"Yes, Uncle John."

"Not in the least, my dear!"

"No, Uncle John."

They walked another mile, and presently stopped at the top of a breezy hill, to draw breath, and look about them. The sun was going down in a cheerful blaze; the whole country smiled, and was glad of its own beauty. Mr. Montfort gazed about him, and heaved a long sigh of content.

"Pretty! pretty country!" he said. "Spreading fields, quiet woods, sky over all, undisturbed. Yes! you are very silent, my dear. Have I been silent, too, or have I been talking?"

"What a curious question!" thought Margaret.

"You — you have not said much, Uncle John," she replied.

"Well, my love, that may be because there isn't much to say. Some situations, Margaret, are best met in silence."

Margaret nodded. She knew her uncle's ways pretty well by this time.

"And yet," continued Mr. Montfort, "it may be well to have just a word of understanding with you, my dear child. Sophronia Montfort is my own cousin, my first cousin."

"Yes, Uncle John," said Margaret, as he seemed to pause for a reply.

"Ri tumpty, — that is to say, there is no gainsaying that fact, — my own cousin. And by natural consequence, Margaret, the own cousin of your father, and by further consequence, your first cousin once removed. It

is — a — it is many years since she has been at Fernley; we must try to make her comfortable during the time — the short time — she is with us. You have put her in the Blue Room; that is comfortable, is it, and properly fitted up, — all the modern inconveniences and abominations, eh?"

Mr. Montfort's own room had a bare floor, a bed, a table, a chest of drawers, and a pitcher and basin and bath that might have been made for Cormoran or Blunderbore, whichever was the bigger.

"Everything, I think, uncle," faltered Margaret, turning crimson, and beginning to tremble. "Oh! Oh, Uncle John! I have something to tell you. I — I don't know how to tell you."

"Don't try, then, my dear," said Uncle John, in his own kind way. "Perhaps it isn't necessary."

"Oh, yes, it is necessary. I shall have no peace till I do, uncle, — you remember you asked me to take the White Rooms; you surely asked me, didn't you?"

"Surely, my child," said Mr. Montfort,

wondering much. "But I wished you to do as you pleased, you know."

"Yes! Oh, uncle, that was it! When Cousin Sophronia came, she — she told Elizabeth to have her trunks carried into the White Rooms."

"So!" said Mr. Montfort.

"Yes, uncle! I was in the passage, and heard her give the order, and I — I could not bear it, Uncle John, I could not, indeed. I flew up-stairs, and brought down some of my things, — all I could carry in two trips, — and, when they came in with the trunk, I — I was sitting there, and — and wondering why they came into my room. Uncle John, do you see? Was it very, very wicked?"

For all reply, Mr. Montfort went off into a fit of laughter so prolonged and violent, that Margaret, who at first tried to join in timidly, became alarmed for him. "Ho! ho! ho!" he laughed, throwing his head back, and expanding his broad chest. "Ha! ha! ha! so you — ho! ho! — you got in first, little miss! Why wasn't I there to see? Oh, why wasn't I there? I would give a farm, a good

farm, to have seen Sophronia's face. Tell me about it again, Margaret. Tell me slowly, so that I may see it all. You have a knack of description, I know; show me the scene."

Slowly, half frightened, and wholly relieved, Margaret went through the matter from beginning to end, making as light as she could of her own triumph, of which she really felt ashamed, pleased as she was to have achieved it. When she had finished, her uncle sat down under a tree, and laughed again; not so violently, but with a hearty enjoyment that took in every detail.

"And Willis had a fit of coughing!" he exclaimed, when Margaret had come to the last word. "Poor Willis! Willis must see a doctor at once. Consumptive, no doubt; and concealed under such a deceptive appearance of brawn! Ho! Margaret, my dear, I feel better, much better. You have cleared the air for me, my child."

"You — are not angry, then, Uncle John? You don't think I ought to have put Cousin Sophronia in the rooms?"

"My love, they should have been burned

to the ground sooner. There was only one person in the world whom your Aunt Faith could not endure, and that person was Sophronia Montfort. You did perfectly right, Margaret; more right than you knew. If she had got into the White Rooms, I should have been under the necessity of taking her forcibly out of them (nothing short of force could have done it), and that would have created an unpleasantness, you see. Yes! Thank you, my dear little girl! I feel quite myself again. We shall worry through, somehow; but remember, Margaret, that you are the mistress of Fernley, and, if you have any trouble, come to me. And now, my love, we must go home to tea!"

When the gong rang for tea, Margaret and her uncle entered the dining-room together — to find Cousin Sophronia already seated at the head of the table, rattling the teacups with intention.

"Well, my dears!" she cried, in sprightly tones. "You walked further than you intended, did you not? I should not have sat down without you, but I was simply

famished. I always think punctuality such an important factor in the economy of life. It is high time you had some steady head to look after you, John!" and she shook her head in affectionate playfulness. "Sit down, John!"

Mr. Montfort did not sit down.

"I am sorry you were hungry, Sophronia," he said, kindly. "I cannot think of letting you wait to pour tea for me, my dear cousin. Margaret does that always; you are to sit here by me, and begin at once upon your own supper. Allow me!"

Margaret hardly knew how it was done. There was a bow, a courtly wave of the hand, a movement of chairs; and her own place was vacant, and Cousin Sophronia was sitting at the side place, very red in the face, her eyes snapping out little green lights; and Uncle John was bending over her with cordial kindness, pushing her chair in a little further, and lifting the train of her dress out of the way. With downcast eyes, Margaret took her place, and poured the tea in silence. She felt as if a weight were on her

eyelids; she could not lift her eyes; she could not speak, and yet she must. She shook herself, and made a great effort.

"How do you like your tea, Cousin Sophronia?" she asked, in a voice that tried to sound cheerful and unconcerned. And, when she had spoken, she managed, with another effort, to look up. Cousin Sophronia was smiling and composed, and met her timid glance with an affectionate nod.

"Weak, my dear, if you please, — weak, with cream and sugar. Yes, — that will be excellent, I have no doubt. I have to be a little exact about my tea, my nerves being what they are. The nights I have, if my tea is not precisely the right shade! It seems absurd, but life is made up of little things, my dear John. And very right and wise, to have the dear child learn to do these things, and practise on us, even if it is a little trying at first. Is that the beef tea, Elizabeth? Thank you. I told Frances to make me some beef tea, John; I knew hers could be depended on, though I suppose she has grown rusty in a good many ways, with this hermit life of

yours, — so bad for a cook, I always think. Yes, this is fair, but not quite what I should have expected from Frances. I must see her in the morning, and give her a good rousing; we all need a good rousing once in awhile. Frances and I have always been the best of friends; we shall get on perfectly, I have no doubt. Ah! The old silver looks well, John. Where did that sugar-bowl come from? Is it Montfort, or Paston? Paston, I fancy! The Montfort silver is heavier, eh?"

"Possibly!" said Mr. Montfort. "That sugar-bowl is neither one nor the other, however. It is Dutch."

"Really! Vanderdecken? I didn't know you had any Vanderdecken silver, John. Grandmother Vanderdecken left all her silver, I thought, to our branch. Such a mistake, I always think, to scatter family silver. Let each branch have *all* that belongs to it, I always say. I feel very strongly about it."

"This is not Vanderdecken," said Mr. Montfort, patiently. "I bought it in Amsterdam."

"Oh! in Amsterdam! indeed! boughten

silver never appeals to me. And speaking of silver, I have wished for years that I could find a trace of the old Vanderdecken porringer. You remember it, surely, John, at Grandmother Vanderdecken's? She had her plum porridge in it every night, and I used to play with the cow on the cover. I have tried and tried to trace it, but have never succeeded. Stolen, I fear, by some dishonest servant."

"I beg your pardon, Cousin Sophronia," said Margaret, blushing. "I have the old Vanderdecken porringer, if it is the one with the cow on the cover."

"*You!*" cried Miss Sophronia, opening her eyes to their fullest extent.

"Yes," Margaret replied. "There it is, on the sideboard. I have eaten bread and milk out of it ever since I can remember, and I still use it at breakfast."

Speechless for the moment, Miss Sophronia made an imperious sign to Elizabeth, who brought her the beautiful old dish, not without a glance of conscious pride at the wonderful blue polish on it. There was no piece of

plate in the house that took so perfect a polish as this.

Miss Sophronia turned it over and over. Her eyes were very green. "Margaret Bleecker. On the occasion of her christening, from her godmother," she read. "Yes, this is certainly the Vanderdecken porringer. And may I ask how you came by it, my dear?"

"Certainly, Cousin Sophronia. Aunt Eliza Vanderdecken gave it to me at my christening; she was my godmother, you see."

"A most extraordinary thing for Eliza Vanderdecken to do!" cried the lady. "Eliza Vanderdecken knew, of course, that she was meant to have but a life-interest in the personal property, as she never married. I cannot understand Eliza's doing such a thing. I have longed all my life for this porringer; I have associations with it, you see, lifelong associations. I remember my Grandmother Vanderdecken distinctly; you never saw her, of course, as she died years before you were born."

"Yes," said Margaret, gently, but not

without intention. "And I, Cousin Sophronia, associate it with Aunt Eliza, whom I remember distinctly, and who was my godmother, and very kind to me. I value this porringer more than almost any of my possessions. Thank you, Elizabeth; if you would put it back, please. Will you have some more tea, Cousin Sophronia?"

"Let me give you another bit of chicken, Sophronia!" said Mr. Montfort, heartily. "I think we have had enough about porringers, haven't we? There are six or seven, I believe, in the strong closet. One of 'em was Adam's, I've always been told. A little gravy, Sophronia? You're eating nothing."

"I have no appetite!" said Miss Sophronia. "You know I only eat to support life, John. A side-bone, then, if you insist, and a tiny bit of the breast. William always says, 'You must live,' and I suppose I must. Cranberry sauce! Thank you! I am really too exhausted to enjoy a morsel, but I will make an effort. We *can* do what we *try* to do, I always say. Thank you, dearest John. I dare say I shall be better to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRIALS OF MARGARET.

Margaret woke early the next morning, and lay wondering where she was. Her eyes were used to opening on rose-flowered walls and mahogany bed-posts. Here all was soft and white, no spot of colour anywhere. She came to herself with a start, and yesterday with its happenings came back to her. She sighed, and a little worried wrinkle came on her smooth forehead. What a change, in a few short hours! Was all their peaceful, dreamy life over, the life that suited both her and her uncle so absolutely? They had been so happy! Was it over indeed? It seemed at first as if she could not get up and face the cares of the day, under the new conditions. Indolent by nature, Margaret dreaded change, and above change unpleasantness; it seemed as if she might have plenty of both. She rose and

dressed in a despondent mood; but when her hair was pinned up and her collar straight, she took herself to task. "I give you three minutes!" she said, looking at herself in the glass. "If you can't look cheerful by that time, you can go to bed again."

The threat, or something else, carried the point, for it was an entirely cheerful young woman who came into the library, with a rose for Uncle John's buttonhole. Miss Montfort was already there, and responded with sad sprightliness to Margaret's greeting. "Thank you, my dear! I was just telling your uncle, it is a mere matter of form to ask if I have slept. I seldom sleep, especially if I am up-stairs. The servants over my head, it may be, — or if not that, I have the feeling of insecurity, — stairs, you understand, in case of fire. Dear William had my rooms fitted up on the ground floor. 'Sophronia,' he said, 'you must sleep!' I suppose it is necessary, but I am so used to lying awake. Such frightful noises in the walls, my dear John! Rats, I suppose? Has the wainscoting been examined lately, in the room you have put

"AFTERWARDS SHE SALLIED OUT INTO THE GARDEN.

me in? Not that it matters in the least; I am the person in the world most easily suited, I suppose. A cot, a corner, a crust, as William says, and I am satisfied."

It took several crusts to satisfy Miss Sophronia at breakfast. Afterwards she sallied out into the garden, where Mr. Montfort was enjoying his morning cigar, with Margaret at his side. "You dear child," said the sprightly lady, "run now and amuse yourself, or attend to any little duties you may have set yourself. So important, I always say, for the young to be regular in everything they do. I am sure you agree with me, dearest John. I will be your uncle's companion, my love; that is my duty and my pleasure now. I must see your roses, John! No one in the world loves roses as I do. What do you use for them? I have a recipe for an infallible wash; I must give it to you, I must indeed."

Margaret went into the house; there was no place for her, for the lady was leaning on Mr. Montfort's arm, chattering gaily in his ear. Margaret was conscious of an unpleasant sensation which was entirely new to her.

She had always been with people she liked. Rita had often distressed her, but still she was most lovable, with all her faults. Cousin Sophronia was — not — lovable, the girl said to herself.

It was a relief to visit the kitchen, and find Frances beaming over her bread-pan. The good woman hailed Margaret with delight, and received her timid suggestions as to dinner with enthusiasm.

"Yes, Miss Margaret, I do think as a chicken-pie would be the very thing. I've a couple of fowl in the house now, and what would you think of putting in a bit of ham, miss?"

"Oh!" said Margaret. "Is that what you usually do, Frances? Then I am sure it will be just right. And about a pudding; what do you think, Frances? You know so many kinds of puddings, and they are all so good!"

Well, Frances had been thinking that if Miss Margaret should fancy apple-fritters, Mr. Montfort was fond of them, and they had not had them this month. And lemon-juice with them, or a little sugar and wine; which did Miss Margaret think would be best? This was a

delightful way of keeping house; and after praising the bread, which was rising white and light in the great pan, and poking the bubbles with her little finger, and begging that she might be allowed to mix it some day soon, Margaret went back in a better humour to the White Rooms, and sat down resolutely to her buttonholes. There would be no walk this morning, evidently; well, when she had done her hour's stint, she would go for a little stroll by herself. After all, perhaps Uncle John would, when the strangeness had worn off a little, enjoy having some one of his own age to talk to; of course she was very young, too young to be much of a companion. Still, —

Well, she would be cheerful and patient, and try to make things pleasant so far as she could. And now she could only go and wish Uncle John good-bye when he started for town, and perhaps walk to the station with him, if he was going to walk.

While she sat sewing, glancing at the clock from time to time, Cousin Sophronia came in, work-bag in hand.

"He is gone!" she said, cheerfully. "I saw him off at the gate. Dearest John! Excellent, sterling John Montfort! Such a pleasure to be with him! Such a joy to feel that I can make a home for him!"

"Gone!" echoed Margaret, looking up in dismay. "Why, surely it is not train time!"

"An early train, my love," the lady explained. "Your dear uncle felt obliged to start an hour earlier than usual, he explained to me. These busy men! And how are you occupying yourself, my dear? Ah! buttonholes? Most necessary! But, my love, you are working these the wrong way!"

"No, I think not," said Margaret. "This is the way I have always made them, Cousin Sophronia."

"Wrong, my dear! Quite wrong, I assure you. Impossible to get a smooth edge if you work them that way. Let me — h'm! yes! that is fairly even, I confess; but the other way is the correct one, you must take my word for it; and I will show you how, with pleasure. So important, I always say, to do things just as they should be done!"

In vain Margaret protested that she understood the other way, but preferred this. She finally, for quiet's sake, yielded, and pricked her fingers, and made herself hot and cross, working the wrong way.

Miss Sophronia next began to cross-question her about Mrs. Cheriton's last days. Such a saintly woman! Austere, some thought; perhaps not always charitable —

"Oh!" cried Margaret, indignant. "Cousin Sophronia, you cannot have known Aunt Faith at all. She was the very soul of charity; and as for being austere — but it is evident you did not know her." She tried to keep down her rising temper, with thoughts of the sweet, serene eyes that had never met hers without a look of love.

"I knew her before you were born, my dear!" said Miss Sophronia, with a slightly acid smile. "Oh, yes, I was intimately acquainted with dear Aunt Faith. I have never thought it right to be blind to people's little failings, no matter how much we love them. I always tell my brother William, 'William, do not ask me to be blind! Ask me, expect

me, to be indulgent, to be devoted, to be self-sacrificing, — but not blind; blindness is contrary to my nature, and you must not expect it.' Yes! And — what was done with the clothes, my dear?"

"The clothes?" echoed Margaret. "Aunt Faith's clothes, do you mean, Cousin Sophronia?"

"No. I meant the Montfort clothes; the heirlooms, my dear. But perhaps you never saw them?"

"Oh, yes, I have seen them often," said Margaret. "They are in the cedar chest, Cousin Sophronia, where they have always been. It is in the deep closet there," she nodded towards an alcove at the other end of the room.

Miss Sophronia rose with alacrity. "Ah! I think I will look them over. Very valuable, some of those clothes are; quite unsuitable, I have thought for some years, to have them under the charge of an aged person, who could not in the course of nature be expected to see to them properly. I fear I shall find them in a sad condition."

Her hand was already on the door, when Margaret was able to speak. "Excuse me, Cousin Sophronia; the chest is locked."

"Very proper! Entirely proper!" cried the lady. "And you have the key? That will not do, will it, my love? Too heavy for these dear young shoulders, such a weight of responsibility! I will take entire charge of this; not a word! It will be a pleasure! Where is the key, did you say, love?"

"Uncle John has the key!" said Margaret, quietly; and blamed herself severely for the pleasure she felt in saying it.

"Oh!" Miss Montfort paused, her hand on the door; for a moment she seemed at a loss; but she went on again.

"Right, Margaret! Very right, my love! You felt yourself, or your uncle felt for you, the unfitness of your having charge of such valuables. Ahem! I — no doubt dear John will give me the key, as soon as I mention it. I — I shall not speak of it at once; there is no hurry — except for the danger of moth. An old house like Fernley is always riddled with moth. I fear the clothes must be quite

eaten away with them. Such a sad pity! The accumulation of generations!"

Margaret hastened to assure her that the clothes were looked over regularly once a month, and that no sign of moths had ever been found in them. Miss Sophronia sighed and shook her head, and crocheted for some minutes in silence; she was making a brown and yellow shoulder-shawl. Margaret thought she had never seen a shawl so ugly.

"Has Cousin William Montfort any daughters?" she asked, presently, thinking it her turn to bear some of the burden of entertainment.

"Four, my dear!" was the prompt reply. "Sweet girls! young, heedless, perhaps not always considerate; but the sweetest girls in the world. Amelia is just your age; what a companion she would be for you! Dear Margaret! I must write to William, I positively must, and suggest his asking you for a good long visit. Such a pleasure for you and for Amelia! Not a word, my dear! I shall consider it a duty, a positive duty! Amelia is thought to resemble me in many

ways; she is the image of what I was at her age. I am forming her; her mother is something of an invalid, as I think I have told you. The older girls are away from home just now, — they make a good many visits; I am always there, and they feel that they can go. If they were at home, I should beg dear John Montfort to invite Amelia here; such a pleasure for him, to have young life in the house. But as it is, William must ask you. Consider it settled, my love. A — what was done with Aunt Faith's jewels, my dear? She had some fine pearls, I remember. Vanderdecken pearls they were originally; I should hardly suppose Aunt Faith would have felt that she had more than a life interest in them. And the great amethyst necklace; did she ever show you her jewels, my love?"

Margaret blushed, and braced herself to meet the shock. "I have them, Cousin Sophronia!" she said, meekly. "Aunt Faith wanted me to have all her jewels, and she gave them to me before — before she died." Her voice failed, and the tears rushed to her eyes. She was thinking of the frail, white-

clad figure bending over the ancient jewel-box, and taking out the pearls. She heard the soft voice saying, "Your great-grandmother's pearls, my Margaret; they are yours now. Wear them for me, and let me have the pleasure of seeing them on your neck. You are my pearl, Margaret; the only pearl I care for now." Dear, dearest Aunt Faith. Why was she not here?

Before Miss Sophronia could recover her power of speech, a knock came at the door.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Margaret!" said Elizabeth, putting her head in, in answer to Margaret's "Come in!" "The butcher is here, miss, and Frances thought perhaps, would you come out and see him, miss?"

"Certainly!" said Margaret, rising; but Miss Sophronia was too quick for her.

"In a moment!" she cried, cheerfully. "Tell Frances I will be there in a moment, Elizabeth! Altogether too much for you, dear Margaret, to have so much care. *I* cannot have too much care! It is what I live for; give the household matters no further thought, I beg of you. You might be setting your

bureau drawers in order, if you like, while I am seeing the butcher; I always look over Amelia's drawers once a week — "

She glided away, leaving Margaret white with anger. How was she to endure this? She was nearly eighteen; she had taken care of herself ever since she was seven, and had attained, or so she fancied, perfection, in the matter of bureau-drawers, at the age of twelve. To have her precious arrangements looked over, her boxes opened, her — oh, there could be, there *was* no reason why she should submit to this! She locked the drawers quietly, one after the other, and put the key in her pocket. She would be respectful; she would be civil always, and cordial when she could, but she would not be imposed upon.

By the time Miss Sophronia came back, Margaret was composed, and greeted her cousin with a pleasant smile; but this time it was the lady who was agitated. She came hurrying in, her face red, her air perturbed. "Insufferable!" she cried, as soon as the door was closed. "Margaret, that woman is insufferable! She must leave at once."

"Woman! what woman, Cousin Sophronia?" asked Margaret, looking up in amazement.

"That Frances! She — why, she is impertinent, Margaret. She insulted me; insulted me grossly. I shall speak to John Montfort directly he returns. She must go; I cannot stay in the house with her."

Go! Frances, who had been at Fernley twenty years; for whom the new kitchen, now only fifteen years old, had been planned and arranged! Margaret was struck dumb for a moment; but recovering herself, she tried to soothe the angry lady, assuring her that Frances could not have meant to be disrespectful; that she had a quick temper, but was so good and faithful, and so attached to Uncle John; and so on. In another moment, to her great discomfiture, Miss Sophronia burst into tears, declared that she was alone in the world, that no one loved her or wanted her, and that she was the most unhappy of women. Filled with remorseful pity, Margaret bent over her, begging her not to cry. She brought a smelling-bottle, and Miss Sophronia clutched it, sobbing, and told Margaret she was an

angelic child. "This — this is — a Vanderdecken vinaigrette!" she said, between her sobs. "Did Eliza Vanderdecken give you this, too? Very singular of Eliza! But she never had any sense of fitness. Thank you my dear! I suffer — no living creature knows what I suffer with my nerves. I — shall be better soon. Don't mind anything I said; I must suffer, but it shall always be in silence, I always maintain that. No one shall know; I never speak of it; I am the grave, for silence. Do not — do not tell your uncle, Margaret, how you have seen me suffer. Do not betray my momentary weakness!"

"Certainly not!" said Margaret, heartily. "I will not say a word, Cousin Sophronia, of course!"

"He would wish to know!" said Miss Sophronia, smothering a sob into a sigh. "John Montfort would be furious if he thought I was ill-treated, and we were concealing it from him. He is a lion when once roused. Ah! I should be sorry for that woman. But forgiveness is a duty, my dear, and I forgive. See! I am myself again.

Quite —" with a hysterical giggle — "quite myself! I — I will take the vinaigrette to my room with me, I think, my dear. Thank you! Dear Margaret! cherub child! how you have comforted me!" She went, and Margaret heard her sniffing along the entry; heard, and told herself she had no business to notice such things; and went back rather ruefully to her buttonholes.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW TYPE.

"My child, I thought you were never coming again!" said Mrs. Peyton. "Do you know that it is a week since I have seen you? I have been destroyed, — positively destroyed, with solitude."

"I am so sorry," said Margaret. "I could not come before; truly I could not, Mrs. Peyton. And how have you been?"

Mrs. Peyton leaned back on her pillows, with a little laugh. "Who cares how I have been?" she said, lightly. "What does it matter how I have been? Tell me some news, Margaret. I must have news. You are alive, you move, and have your being; tell me something that will make me feel alive, too."

Margaret looked at the lady, and thought she looked very much alive. She was a vision

of rose colour, from the silk jacket fluttering with ribbons, to the pink satin that shimmered through the lace bedspread. The rosy colour almost tinted her cheeks, which were generally the hue of warm ivory. Her hair, like crisped threads of gold, was brought down low on her forehead, hiding any lines that might have been seen there; it was crowned by a bit of cobweb lace, that seemed too slight to support the pink ribbon that held it together. The lady's hands were small, and exquisitely formed, and she wore several rings of great value; her eyes were blue and limpid, her features delicate and regular. Evidently, this had been a great beauty. To Margaret, gazing at her in honest admiration, she was still one of the most beautiful creatures that could be seen.

Mrs. Peyton laughed under the girl's simple look of pleasure. "You like my new jacket?" she said. "The doctor never so much as noticed it this morning. I think I shall send him away, and get another, who has eyes in his head. You are the only person who really cares for my clothes, Margaret, and

they are the only interest I have in the world."

"I wish you wouldn't talk so!" said Margaret, colouring. "You don't mean it, and why will you say it?"

"I do mean it!" said the beautiful lady. "I mean every word of it. There's nothing else to care for, except you, you dear little old-fashioned thing. I like you, because you are quaint and truthful. Have you seen my pink pearl? You are not half observant, that's the trouble with you, Margaret Montfort."

She held out her slender hand; Margaret took it, and bent over it affectionately. "Oh, what a beautiful ring!" she cried. "I never saw a pink pearl like this before, Mrs. Peyton, so brilliant, and such a deep rose colour. Isn't it very wonderful?"

"The jeweller thought so," said Mrs. Peyton. "He asked enough for it; it might have been the companion to Cleopatra's. The opal setting is pretty, too, don't you think? And I have some new stones. You will like to see those."

She took up a small bag of chamois leather, that lay on the bed beside her, opened it, and a handful of precious stones rolled out on the lace spread. Margaret caught after one and another in alarm. "Oh! Oh, Mrs. Peyton, they frighten me! Why, this diamond — I never saw such a diamond. It's as big as a pea."

"Imperfect!" said the lady. "A flaw in it, you see; but the colour is good, and it does just as well for a plaything, though I don't like flawed things, as a rule. This sapphire is a good one, — deep, you see; I like a deep sapphire."

"This light one is nearer your eyes," said Margaret, taking up a lovely clear blue stone.

"Flatterer! People used to say that once; a long time ago. Heigh ho, Margaret, don't ever grow old! Take poison, or throw yourself out of the window, but don't grow old. It's a shocking thing to do."

Margaret looked at her friend with troubled, affectionate eyes, and laid her hand on the jewelled fingers.

"Oh, I mean it!" said the lady, with a pretty little grimace. "I mean it, Miss Puritan. See! Here's a pretty emerald. But you haven't told me the news. Mr. Montfort is well always?"

"Always!" said Margaret. "We — we have a visitor just now, Mrs. Peyton, — some one you know."

"Some one I know?" cried Mrs. Peyton. "I thought every one I knew was dead and buried. Who is it, child? Don't keep me in suspense. Can't you see that I am palpitating?"

She laughed, and looked so pretty, and so malicious, that Margaret wanted to kiss and to shake her at the same moment.

"It is a cousin of Uncle John's and of mine," she said; "Miss Sophronia Montfort."

"*What!*" cried Mrs. Peyton, sitting up in bed. "Sophronia Montfort? You are joking, Margaret."

Assured that Margaret was not joking, she fell back again on her pillows. "Sophronia Montfort!" she said, laughing softly. "I

have not heard of her since the flood. How does John — how does Mr. Montfort endure it, Pussy? He was not always a patient man."

Margaret thought her uncle one of the most patient men she had ever seen.

"And how many men have you seen, little girl? Never mind! I will allow him all the qualities of the Patient Patriarch. He will need them all, if he is to have Sophronia long. I am sorry for you, Pussy! Come over as often as you can to see me. I am dull, but there are worse things than dullness."

This was not very encouraging.

"She — Cousin Sophronia — sent you a great many messages," Margaret said, timidly. "She — is very anxious to see you, Mrs. Peyton. She would like to come over some morning, and spend an hour with you."

"If she does, I'll poison her!" said Mrs. Peyton, promptly. "Don't look shocked, Margaret Montfort; I shall certainly do as I say. Sophronia comes here at peril of her life, and you may tell her so with my compliments."

Margaret sat silent and distressed, not knowing what to say. She had known very few people in her quiet life, and this beautiful lady, whom she admired greatly, also puzzled her sadly.

"I cannot tell her that, can I, dear Mrs. Peyton?" she said, at last. "I shall tell her that you are not well, — that is true, most certainly, — and that you do not feel able to see her."

"Tell her what you please," said Emily Peyton, laughing again. "If she comes, I shall poison her, — that is my first and last word. Tell her? Tell her that Emily Peyton is a wreck; that she lies here like a log, week after week, month after month, caring for nothing, no one caring for her, except a kind little girl, who is frightened at her wild talk. I might try the poison on myself first, Margaret; what do you think of that?" Then, seeing Margaret's white, shocked face, she laughed again, and fell to tossing the gems into the air, and catching them as they fell. "It would be a pity, though, just when I have got all these new playthings. Did you

bring a book to read to me, little girl? I can't abide reading, but I like to hear your voice. You have something, I see it in your guilty face. Poetry, I'll be bound. Out with it, witch! You hope to bring me to a sense of the error of my ways. Why, I used to read poetry, Margaret, by the dozen yards. Byron, — does any one read Byron nowadays?"

"My father was fond of Byron," said Margaret. "He used to read me bits of 'Childe Harold' and the 'Corsair;' I liked them, and I always loved the 'Assyrian.' But — I thought you might like something bright and cheerful to-day, Mrs. Peyton, so I brought Austin Dobson. Are you fond of Dobson?"

"Never heard of him!" said the lady, carelessly. "Read whatever you like, child; your voice always soothes me. Will you come and be my companion, Margaret? Your uncle has Sophronia now; he cannot need you. Come to me! You shall have a thousand, two thousand dollars a year, and all the jewels you want. I'll have these set for you, if you like."

"'DID YOU BRING A BOOK TO READ TO ME, LITTLE GIRL?'"

She seemed only half in earnest, and Margaret laughed. "You sent your last companion away, you know, Mrs. Peyton," she said. "I'm afraid I should not suit you, either."

"My dear, that woman ate apples! No one could endure that, you know. Ate — champed apples in my ears, and threw the cores into my grate. Positively, she smelt of apples all day long. I had to have the room fumigated when she left. A dreadful person! One of her front teeth was movable, too, and set me distracted every time she opened her mouth. Are you ever going to begin?"

Margaret read two or three of her favourite poems, but with little heart in her reading, for she felt that her listener was not listening. Now and then would come an impatient sigh, or a fretful movement of the jewelled hands; once a sapphire was tossed up in the air, and fell on the floor by Margaret's feet. Only when she began the lovely "Good Night, Babette!" did Mrs. Peyton's attention seem to fix. She listened quietly, and, at the end, drew a deep breath.

"You call that bright and cheerful, do you?" Mrs. Peyton murmured. "Everything looks cheerful in the morning. Good night, — "I grow so old," — how dare you read me such a thing as that, Margaret Montfort? It is an impertinence."

"Indeed," said Margaret, colouring, and now really wounded. "I do not understand you at all to-day, Mrs. Peyton. I don't seem to be able to please you, and it is time for me to go."

She rose, and the lady, her mood changing again in an instant, took her two hands, and drew her close to her side.

"You are my only comfort," she said. "Do you hear that? You are the only person in this whole dreadful place that I would give the half of a burnt straw to see. Remember that, when I behave too abominably. Yes, go now, for I am going to have a bad turn. Send Antonia; and come again soon — soon, do you hear, Margaret? But remember — remember that the poison-bowl waits for Sophronia!"

"What — shall I give her any message?"

said poor Margaret, as she bent to kiss the white forehead between the glittering waves of hair.

"Give her my malediction," said Mrs. Peyton. "Tell her it is almost a consolation for lying here, to think I need not see her. Tell her anything you like. Go now! Good-bye, child! Dear little quaint, funny, prim child, good-bye!"

Margaret walked home sadly enough. She loved and admired her beautiful friend, but she did not understand her, and there was much that she could not approve. It seemed absurd, she often said to herself, for a girl of her age to criticise, to venture to disapprove, of a woman old enough to be her mother, one who had travelled the world over, and knew plenty of human nature, if little of books. Yet, the thought would come again, there was no age to right and wrong; and there were things that it could not be right to think, or kind to say, at eighteen or at eighty. And her uncle did not like Mrs. Peyton. Margaret felt that, without his having

ever put it into words. Still, she was so beautiful, so fascinating,—and so kind to her! Perhaps, unconsciously, Margaret did miss a good deal the two young cousins who had been with her during her first year at Fernley; surely, and every hour, she missed her Aunt Faith, whose tenderness had been that of the mother she had never known.

She was in no haste to go home; there was still an hour before Uncle John would come. There was little peace at home in these days, but a prying eye, and a tongue that was seldom still save in sleep. She had left Elizabeth in tears to-day, her precious linen having been pulled over, and all the creases changed because they ran the wrong way. In vain Margaret had reminded her of the heroine of the story she had liked so much, the angelic Elizabeth of Hungary. "It don't make much difference, Miss Margaret!" Elizabeth said. "I am no saint, miss, and all the roses in the world wouldn't make my table-cloths look fit to go on, now."

Frances was "neither to hold or to bind;"

even the two young girls whom the elder women had in training were tossing their heads and muttering over their brasses and their saucepans. The apple of discord seemed to be rolling all about the once peaceful rooms of Fernley House. "I'll go home through the woods," said Margaret, "and see if they have begun work on the bog yet."

It was lovely in the woods. Margaret thought there could be no such woods in the world as these of Fernley. The pines were straight and tall, and there was little or no undergrowth; just clear, fragrant stretches of brown needles, where one could lie at length and look up into the whispering green, and watch the birds and squirrels. There was moss here and there; here and there, too, a bed of pale green ferns, delicate and plumy; but most of it was the soft red-brown carpet that Margaret loved better even than ferns. She walked slowly along, drinking in beauty and rest at every step. If she could only bring the sick lady out here, she thought, to breathe this life-giving air! Surely she would be better! She did not look ill enough to

stay always in bed. They must try to bring it about.

She stopped at the little brook, and sat down on a mossy stone. The water was clear and brown, breaking into white over the pebbles here and there. How delightful it would be to take off her shoes and stockings, and paddle about a little! Peggy, her cousin, would have been in the water in an instant, very likely shoes and all; but Margaret was timid, and it required some resolution to pull off her shoes and stockings, and a good deal of glancing over her shoulder, to make sure that no one was in sight. Indeed, who could be? The water was cool; oh, so cool and fresh! She waded a little way; almost lost her balance on a slippery stone, and fled back to the bank, laughing and out of breath. A frog came up to look at her, and goggled in amazement; she flipped water at him with her hand, and he vanished indignant. It would be very pleasant to walk along the bed of the stream, as far as the entrance to the bog meadow. Could she venture so far? No, for after all, it was possible that some of the workmen might

have arrived and might be in the neighbourhood, though they were not to begin work till the next day. Very slowly Margaret drew her feet out of the clear stream where they twinkled and looked so white, — Margaret had pretty feet, — but she could not make up her mind to put on the shoes and stockings just yet. She must dry her feet; and this moss was delightful to walk on. So on she went, treading lightly and carefully, finding every step a pure pleasure, till she saw sunlight breaking through the green, and knew that she was coming to the edge of the peat bog. Ah, what memories this place brought to Margaret's mind! She could see her cousin Rita, springing out in merry defiance over the treacherous green meadow; could hear her scream, and see her sinking deep, deep, into the dreadful blackness below. Then, like a flash, came Peggy from the wood, this very wood she was walking in now, and ran, and crept, and reached out, and by sheer strength and cleverness saved Rita from a dreadful death, while she, Margaret, stood helpless by. Dear, brave Peggy! Ah, dear girls both! How

she would like to see them this moment. Why! Why, what was that?

Some one was whistling out there in the open. Whistling a lively, rollicking air, with a note as clear and strong as a bird's. Horror! The workmen must have come! Margaret was down on the grass in an instant, pulling desperately at her shoes and stockings. From the panic she was in, one might have thought that the woods were full of whistling brigands, all rushing in her direction, with murder in their hearts. She could hardly see; there was a knot in her shoestring; why did she ever have shoes that tied? Her heart was beating, the blood throbbing in her ears, — and all the time the whistling went on, not coming nearer, but trilling away in perfect cheerfulness, though broken now and then, and coming in fits and starts. At last! At last the shoes were tied, and Margaret stood up, still panting and crimson, but feeling that she could face a robber, or even an innocent workman, without being disgraced for life. Cautiously she stole to the edge of the wood,

and peeped between the pine-boles. The sun lay full on the peat bog, and it shone like a great, sunny emerald, friendly and smiling, with no hint of the black treachery at its heart. No hint? But look! Out in the very middle of the bog a figure was standing, balanced on a tussock of firm earth. A light, active figure, in blue jean jumper and overalls. One of the workmen, who did not know of the peril, and was plunging to his destruction? Margaret opened her lips to cry aloud, but kept silence, for the next moment she comprehended that the young man (he was evidently young, though his back was turned to her) knew well enough what he was about. He had a long pole in his hand, and with this he was poking and prodding about in the black depths beneath him. Now he sounded carefully a little way ahead of him, and then, placing his pole carefully on another firm spot, leaped to it lightly. The black bog water gurgled up about his feet, but he did not sink, only planted his feet more firmly, and went on with his sounding. Now he was singing.

What was he singing? What a quaint, funny air!

"A wealthy young farmer of Plymouth, we hear,
He courted a nobleman's daughter, so dear;
And for to be married it was their intent,—

Hi! muskrat!—come out of there!" He almost lost his balance, and Margaret screamed a very small scream, that could not be heard a dozen yards. Recovering himself, the young man began to make his way towards the shore, at a point nearly opposite to where Margaret stood. Springing lightly to the firm ground, he took off his cap, and made a low bow to the bog, saying at the same time something, Margaret could not hear what. Then, looking carefully about him, the young workman appeared to be selecting a spot of earth that was to his mind; having done so, he sat down, took out a note-book, and wrote with ardour for several minutes. Then he took off his cap, and ran his fingers through his hair—which was very curly, and bright red—till it stood up in every direction; then

he turned three elaborate somersaults; and then, with another salute to the bog, and a prolonged whistle, he went off, leaping on his pole, and singing, as he went:

"And for to be mar-ri-ed it was their intent;
All friends and relations had given their consent."

CHAPTER VI.

A LESSON IN GEOGRAPHY.

"MARGARET!"

"Yes, uncle."

"Can you come here a moment, my dear?"

"Surely, Uncle John. I was looking for you, and could not find you."

Margaret came running in from the garden. Her uncle was sitting in his private study, which opened directly on the garden, and communicated by a staircase in the wall with his bedroom. The study was a pleasant room, lined with books for the most part, but with some valuable pictures, and a great table full of drawers, and several presses or secretaries, filled with papers and family documents of every kind. Mr. John Montfort, recluse though he was, was the head of a large and important family connection. Few of his relatives ever saw him, but most of them

were in more or less constant correspondence with him, and he knew all their secrets, though not one of them could boast of knowing his. He was the friend and adviser, the kindly helper, of many a distant cousin who had never met the kind, grave glance of his brown eyes. Peggy Montfort used to say, in the days when it had pleased him to appear as John Strong, the gardener, that it "smoothed her all out," just to look at him; and many people experienced the same feeling on receiving one of his letters. No one had it, however, so strongly as Margaret herself, or so she thought; and it was with a sensation of delightful relief that she answered his call this morning. Mr. Montfort turned round from the great table at which he was sitting, and held out his hand affectionately.

"Come here, my child," he said, "and let me look at you. Look me straight in the eyes; yes, that will do. You are feeling well, Margaret? You look well, I must say."

"Well? Of course, Uncle John! Am I ever anything else? I have never had a day's illness since I came here."

"You do not feel the load of responsibility too much for your young shoulders?" Mr. Montfort went on. "It — it is not too dull for you here, alone month after month with an elderly man, and a hermit, and one who has the reputation of a grim and unfriendly old fellow? What do you say, Margaret?"

The quick tears sprang to Margaret's eyes. She looked up at her uncle, and saw in his eyes the quizzical twinkle that always half puzzled and wholly delighted her. "Oh, uncle!" she cried; "you really deceived me this time! I might have known you were in fun, — but you were so grave!"

"Grave?" said Mr. Montfort. "Never more so, I assure you. I may not have very serious doubts, in my own mind; nevertheless, I want your assurance. Do you, Margaret Montfort, find life a burden under existing circumstances, or do you find it — well, endurable for awhile yet?"

"I find life as happy as I can imagine it," said Margaret, simply; and then, being absolutely truthful, she added, "That is, — I did

find it so, Uncle John, — until these last two weeks."

"Precisely!" said Mr. Montfort. "Not a word, my dear! I understand you. You are fond of children, I think, Margaret?"

"Very fond," said Margaret, thinking that Uncle John was strange indeed to-day.

"Get on well with them, I should suppose. You had a great deal of influence over Peggy, Margaret."

"Dear, good Peggy! She was so ready to be influenced, Uncle John. She was just waiting to — to be helped on a little, don't you know?".

"Yes; so Rita thought, if I remember aright!" said Mr. Montfort, dryly. "But with younger children, eh? You have had some experience of them, perhaps, Margaret?"

Was he still joking? Margaret had not much sense of humour, and she was sadly puzzled again.

"I — I love little children," she said. "Of course I do, Uncle John!"

"Little children, — yes. But how about boys? Active, noisy, happy-go-lucky boys?

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Boys that smash windows, and yell, and tear their clothes on barbed-wire fences? How about those, Margaret?"

"Is that the kind of boy you were, Uncle John?" asked Margaret, smiling. "Because if so, I am sure I shall like them very much."

"Very well, my dear child!" he said. "You are well and happy, and we understand each other, and that is all right, very right. Now, Margaret, — I ask this for form's sake merely, — have you been in this room before, to-day?"

"No, Uncle John," said Margaret.

"Of course you have not. Knew it before I asked you. Do you notice anything unusual in the appearance of the room, my dear?"

Margaret looked about her, wondering. It produced an impression of — well, not just the perfect order in which it was generally to be found. Several drawers were half open; a sheaf of papers lay on the floor, as if dropped by a startled hand. The writing things were disarranged, slightly, yet noticeably; for Mr. Montfort always kept them in

one position, which was never changed save when they were in actual use.

"Why, it looks — as if — as if you had been in a hurry, Uncle John," she said at last.

"It looks as if *some one* had been in a hurry," said Mr. Montfort, significantly. "I have not been in this room before, to-day; I found it in this condition. Never mind, my dear! I am going to write a letter now. Don't let me keep you any longer."

Margaret went away, wondering much; her uncle joined her soon, and they looked at the roses together, and chatted as usual, and were happy, till Cousin Sophronia rapped on the window with her thimble, and asked whether they were coming in, or whether she should come out and join them.

She was trying that evening, Cousin Sophronia. Nothing on the tea-table suited her, to begin with. She declared the beef tea unfit to touch, and desired Mr. Montfort to taste it, which he politely but firmly refused to do. "But it is not fit to eat!" cried the lady. "I insist on your tasting it, my dear John."

"My dear Sophronia, I am extremely sorry it is not to your taste. If it is not good, I certainly do not want to taste it. Send it away and ask me to taste something that is good."

The chicken was tough. "You should change your butcher, John. Or are these your own fowls? Chickens I will not call them; they must be two years old at least. Nothing disagrees with me like tough poultry. Nobody to look after the fowls properly, I suppose. I must take them in hand; not that I have had any experience myself of fowls, but an educated person, you understand. So important, I always say, to bring educated intelligence to bear on these matters. And then, these knives are so dull! Even if the fowls were tender, impossible to make an impression with such a knife as this. Elizabeth, what do you use for your knives?"

Elizabeth used Bristol brick, as she always had done.

"Ah, entirely out of date, Bristol brick. You must send for some of the preparation that William uses, John. Nothing like it. Some-

thing or other, it's called; somebody's — I can't remember now, but we will have it, never fear, dearest John. Shameful, for you to be subjected to dull knives *and* tough poultry. What are these? Strawberries? Dear me! I did hope we could have raspberries this evening. One is so tired of strawberries by this time, don't you think so?"

"I am sorry," said Mr. Montfort. "The raspberries will be ripe in a day or two, Sophronia; Willis thought they would hardly do to pick to-day."

"Oh, but I assure you, my dearest John, Willis is entirely wrong. I examined the bushes myself; I went quite through them, and found them quite — entirely ripe. That was just Willis's laziness, depend upon it. These old servants" (Elizabeth had gone to get more cream, the lady having emptied the jug on her despised strawberries) "are too lazy to be of much use. Depend upon it, John, you will know no peace until you get rid of them all, and start afresh; I am thinking very seriously about it, I assure you, my dear fellow. Yes, I have been longing

for days for a plate of raspberries and cream. I have so little appetite, that whenever I *can* tempt it a little, the doctor says, I must not fail to do so. No more, dear, thank you! It is of no consequence, you know, really, not the least in the world; only, one can be of so much more use, when one keeps one's health. Ah, you remember what health I had as a child, John! You remember the dear old days here, when we were children together?"

"I remember them very well, Sophronia," said Mr. Montfort, steadily. "And speaking of that, I am expecting some young visitors here in a day or two."

Cousin Sophronia looked up with a jerk; Margaret looked at her uncle in surprise; he sipped his tea tranquilly, and repeated: "Some young visitors, yes. They will interest you, Sophronia, with your strong family feeling."

"Who — who are they?" asked Miss Sophronia. "Most ill-judged, I must say, to have children here just now; who did you say they were, John?"

"Cousin Anthony's children. They lost

their mother some years ago, you remember; I fancy Anthony has had rather a hard time with them since. Now he has to go out West for the rest of the summer, and I have asked them to come here."

For once Miss Sophronia was speechless. After a moment's silence, Margaret ventured to say, timidly, "How old are the children, Uncle John?"

"Really, my dear, I hardly know. Two boys and a girl, I believe. I don't even know their names; haven't seen their father for twenty years. Good fellow, Anthony; a little absent-minded and heedless, but a good fellow always. I was glad to be able to oblige him."

Miss Sophronia recovered her speech.

"Really, my dear John," she said, with an acrid smile; "I had no idea you were such a philanthropist. If Fernley is to become an asylum for orphan relations —"

"Sophronia!" said Mr. Montfort.

His tone was quiet, but there was something in it that made the lady redden, and check herself instantly. Margaret wondered

what would become of her, if her uncle should ever speak to her in that tone.

"I am sure I meant nothing!" said Miss Sophronia, bridling and rallying again. "I am sure there was no allusion to our dearest Margaret. Absurd! But these children are very different. Why, Anthony Montfort is your second cousin, John. I know every shade of relationship; it is impossible to deceive me in such matters, John."

"I should not attempt it, my dear cousin," said Mr. Montfort, quietly. "Anthony *is* my second cousin. I will go further to meet you, and admit boldly that these children are my second cousins once removed, and Margaret's third cousins. Where shall we put them, Margaret?"

"My dearest John," cried Miss Sophronia, in her gayest tone, "you are not to give it a thought! Is he, Margaret? No, my dear fellow! It is noble of you — Quixotic, I must think, but undeniably noble — to take in these poor little waifs; but you shall have no further thought about providing for them. Everything shall be arranged; I know the

house from garret to cellar, remember. I will make every arrangement, dearest John, depend upon me!"

The evenings were not very gay at Fernley just now. Miss Sophronia could not keep awake while any one else read aloud; so she took matters into her own hands, and read herself, for an hour by the clock. Her voice was high and thin, and kept Mr. Montfort awake; she was apt to emphasise the wrong words, which made Margaret's soul cry out within her; and she stopped every few minutes to chew a cardamom seed with great deliberation. This simple action had the effect of making both her hearers extremely nervous, they could not have explained why. Also, she was afflicted with a sniff, which recurred at regular intervals, generally in the middle of a sentence. Altogether the reading was a chastened pleasure nowadays; and this particular evening it was certainly a relief when she declared, before the hour was quite over, that she was hoarse, and must stop before the end of the chapter. On the whole, she thought it might be better for her

to go to bed early, and take some warm drink. "It would never do for me to be laid up, with these children coming to be seen after!" she declared. So she departed, and Margaret and her uncle sat down to a game of backgammon, and played slowly and peacefully, lingering over their moves as long as they pleased, and tasting the pleasure of having no one say that they should play this or that, "of course!"

The game over, Mr. Montfort leaned back in his chair, with an air of content.

"This is pleasant!" he said, slowly. "Margaret, my dear, this is very pleasant!" Margaret smiled at him, but made no reply. None was needed: the uncle and niece were so much alike in tastes and feelings, that they hardly needed speech, sometimes, to know each other's thoughts. Both were content to sit now silent, in the soft, cheerful candle-light, looking about on the books and pictures that they loved, and feeling the silence like a cordial.

Suddenly Mr. Montfort's air of cheerful meditation changed. He sat upright, and

leaned slightly forward. He seemed to listen for something. Then suddenly, softly, he rose, and with silent step crossed the room and stood a moment beside the wall. It was a very different face that he turned to Margaret the next instant.

"My dear," he said, "there is some one in my study."

"In your study, Uncle John? What do you mean? That is, — how can you tell, uncle?"

"Come here, and listen!" said her uncle. Margaret stole to his side, and listened, her head, like his, near the wall. She heard the crackling of paper; the sound of a drawer pulled softly out; the clank, muffled, but unmistakable, of brass handles. What did it mean? She looked to her uncle for explanation. He shook his head and motioned her to be silent. Then, taking her hand in his, he led her softly from the room. Margaret followed, greatly wondering, across the wide hall; through the low door that led to the White Rooms, now her own; into her own sitting-room, or Aunt Faith's room, as she still loved to call it. Here Mr. Montfort

released her hand, and again motioned her to be silent.

"I will explain by and by, my dear," he said. "Follow me, now, and learn another lesson in Fernley geography; I was keeping it for a surprise some day, but never mind. Where is this place?"

Margaret noticed, in all her confusion of surprise, that the great white chair was pushed away from its usual place. Her uncle stepped in behind the table near which it always stood, and passed his hand along the smooth white panel of the wall. Noiselessly it swung open, revealing a dark space. Margaret obeyed his gesture, and following, found herself in a narrow passage, carpeted with felt, on which her feet made no sound. They went forward some way; it was quite dark, but she followed her uncle's guidance, and he trod as surely as if it were broad daylight. Presently he stopped, and, with a pressure of the hand, bade her listen again. The rustling of paper sounded very clear now; there was another rustle, too, the rustle of silk. Suddenly, light flashed upon them; Margaret

felt herself drawn swiftly forward; there was a smothered exclamation in her uncle's voice, followed by a scream from another.

They were standing in Mr. Montfort's study. The room was lighted by a single candle, that stood on the writing-table; beside this table, backed against it in an attitude of terror and surprise, stood Miss Sophronia Montfort, her hands full of documents, her eyes glaring. There was a moment of silence, and Margaret counted her heart-beats. Then —

"Can I be of any assistance to you, my dear Sophronia?" asked Mr. Montfort, blandly. "You seem in distress; allow me to relieve you of some of these." He took the papers quietly, and laid them on the table. Miss Sophronia gasped once, twice; opened and shut her eyes several times, and swallowed convulsively; when she spoke, it was with a fluttering voice, but in something like her ordinary tone.

"My dear John! How you startled me! A — a — little surprise for you, my dear fellow. Such a shocking condition as your papers were in. I thought — a kindness —

to bring a little order out of chaos; he! he! ahem! my throat is troublesome to-night. A warm drink! Yes, my dear John, I remembered the old passage, you see. I said, why should I disturb the dear fellow, to ask him for the key to the outer door? And really, John, these papers are too — too bad!"

She shook her head in a manner that was meant to be playful; but suddenly the smile dropped from her face like a mask; for Mr. Montfort did a singular thing. He bent his head forward slightly; fixed his eyes on his cousin with a peculiar expression, and advanced slowly, one step. "Sophronia!" he said.

Miss Sophronia began to tremble.

"Don't, John!" she cried. "John Montfort, don't do it! I am your own cousin. Your father and mine were brothers, John. I hope I know my duty — ah, don't! I will not, John Montfort!"

Margaret looked from one to the other in blank amazement. The lady seemed in the extremity of terror. Her uncle — was this her uncle? Instead of the grave, dignified gentleman, she seemed to see a boy; a boy

intent on mischief, every motion of him alive with power and malice. Step by step he advanced, his hands clenched, his head bent forward, his eyes still fixed, bright and strong, on his cousin.

"Sophronia!" he said, "I am coming! Sophronia! Sophronia! Sophronia!" Each time he quickened voice and step. He was almost upon her; with one wild shriek Miss Sophronia turned and fled. Her skirts whisked along the secret passage; they heard the door bang. She was gone.

Mr. Montfort sat down in his study chair and laughed long and silently.

"Don't look so frightened, my dear!" he said, at last. "It was a scurvy trick, but she deserved it. I — I used to run Sophronia up-stairs, Margaret, when she was a troublesome girl. It always frightened her. I'd have done it in another minute, if she had not run, but I knew she would. Poor Sophronia! I suppose something of the boy stays in us, my dear, as long as we live. I — I am afraid I should rather have enjoyed running Sophronia up-stairs."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DAUNTLESS THREE.

The next morning Miss Sophronia kept her bed; her cold, she said, was too severe to admit of her joining the family at breakfast. Margaret waited on her with an uneasy sense of guilt in general, though she could not accuse herself of any special sin. She did her best to be sympathetic and dutiful, having been brought up to respect her elders sincerely. But she was puzzled all the same, and when it came to any question between her cousin and her uncle, there were no more doubts. She must put herself out of the way as much as possible, and give up, wherever her own pleasure was concerned, — where it was any matter connected with Uncle John, she would be the Rock of Gibraltar. This being settled, the Rock of Gibraltar brought raspberries for Cousin Sophronia's breakfast, and made her room bright with flowers, and

tried to make cheer for her. The poor lady was rather subdued, and told Margaret she was a cherub child; then declared she would not be a burden on any one, and sent the girl away to "amuse herself."

"Be happy as a butterfly, my dear, all the morning; don't give me a thought, I beg of you. If Frances would have a new-laid egg ready for me at eleven — positively a new-laid one, Margaret! Perhaps you would bring it yourself from the hen-yard. I have no confidence in servants, and it would make a pleasant little trip for you. So important, I always say, for the young to have something useful to mingle with their sports. Boiled three minutes and a half, my love! I doubt if I can eat it, but it is my duty to make the attempt. Bless you! Good-bye! If you happen to have nothing to do about twelve, you might bring your work and sit with me. I am the most sociable creature in the world; I cannot endure to be alone when I am ill; but don't have me on your mind, my love, for a single instant."

All the duties attended to, Margaret spent

a delightful hour, with Elizabeth's assistance, in making ready the rooms for the newcomers. The little girl was to have Peggy's room, next her own, and that needed nothing save fresh flowers in the vases, and fresh ribbons on the curtains. But the boys were to have the old nursery, the great room that ran across the whole width of the house, on the third floor. It was a pleasant room, with dormer windows facing east and south, a great fireplace, with a high wire fender, and a huge sofa, covered with red chintz dragons. A funny sofa it was, with little drawers let in along the sides. John Montfort and his brothers used to lie on this sofa, when they had the measles and whooping-cough, and play with the brass drawer-handles, and keep their treasures in the drawers. The windows were barred, and there was a gate across the landing, at the top of the stairs. Elizabeth had suggested taking away the gate and the bars, "such big young gentlemen as these would be, most likely, sir!" but Mr. Montfort shook his head very decidedly.

"If they are Montfort boys, Elizabeth, they will need all the bars we can give them. Master Richard was twelve, when he squeezed himself between these, and went along the gutter hanging by his hands, till he came to the spout, and shinned down it. Never make things too easy for a Montfort boy!"

In one corner stood a huge rocking-horse, with saddle and bridle of crimson leather, rather the worse for wear. He was blind of one eye, and his tail had seen service, but he was a fine animal for all that. Margaret hunted about in the attic, and found a box of ninepins. Marbles, too; Uncle John had told her that there must be marbles somewhere, in a large bag of flowered purple calico, with a red string. They had been there forty years; they must be there still. She found them at last, hanging from a peg of one of the great beams. On the beam close by was written:

"This is my Peg. If any Pig touches my Peg, that Pig will be Pegged. Signed, JOHN MONTFORT."

"Oh," thought Margaret, "what a pleasant boy Uncle John must have been! What good

times we should have had together!" And then she reflected that he could not possibly have been so nice a boy as he was an uncle, and was content.

The marbles, and the rocking-horse, and — what else ought there to be? Tops! Uncle John had said something about tops. Here Margaret screamed, and fled to the attic door. Something was moving on the beam by which she had been standing, perched on a chair. Something rolled slowly along, half the length of the beam, and dropped to the floor and rolled towards her. Laughing now, Margaret stooped and picked up a great ball, a leather ball, striped red and black. On one of the red stripes was written, in large, unconventional letters, "Roger." It was her father's ball! Margaret held the toy very tenderly in her hands, and tried to see the worn, thoughtful face she remembered so well, a rosy boy's face, full of light and laughter. She had seen, yesterday, strangely enough, her uncle's boyish looks, revealed in a flash of mischief; it was less easy to see her father's.

As she stood meditating, the sound of wheels was heard outside. Margaret ran to look out of the little gable window, then clapped her hands together, in amazement and pleasure. The children had come!

When she reached the verandah, they were already standing there, facing Mr. Montfort, who had come out by an early train, and was standing looking at them with amused attention, holding the little girl's hands in his.

"And what are your names, my dears?" he was saying.

"Basil, Merton, and Susan D.," replied the elder boy, promptly, while three pairs of sharp eyes were fastened on the strange uncle.

"Battle, Murder, and Sudden Death!" said Mr. Montfort under his breath. He had no idea that any one could hear him, but a shriek of laughter startled him, and made Margaret jump.

"That's what Puppa calls us!" cried Basil, springing lightly up and down on the tips of his toes. "We didn't know whether you would or not; he said you would pretty soon, anyhow. How do you do, Uncle John? We

are very well, thank you. I am thirteen, and Mert is twelve, and Susan D. is ten. Puppa hopes we shall not be troublesome, and here are the keys of the trunks."

The boy drew a long breath, and looked round him with an air of triumph.

"Well, I should think you would know it!" said his brother. "Been saying it all the way over here."

"More than you could do!" retorted his elder.

"Wouldn't do it anyhow, so there!" said the younger.

These last remarks had been carried on in an undertone, the set speech having been delivered slowly and with much dignity. Finally each boy kicked the other's shins surreptitiously, and then both stared again at their uncle. The little girl had never stirred, but stood gazing up at the big man who held her hands so lightly and yet so kindly, and who had such bright, deep, quiet brown eyes. Margaret, standing in the doorway, scrutinised the three, and felt a sinking at the heart. Basil Montfort was a tall boy

"THE LITTLE GIRL HAD NEVER STIRRED, BUT STOOD GAZING UP AT THE BIG MAN WHO HELD HER HANDS."

for his age, slender and wiry, with tow-coloured hair that stood straight on end, thin lips that curled up at the corners with a suggestion of malice, and piercing gray eyes, which he had a trick of screwing up till they were like gimlet points. The second, Merton, was decidedly better-looking, with pretty curly hair, and blue eyes with an appealing look in them; but Margaret fancied he looked a little sly; and straightway took herself to task for the unkind fancy. The little girl was Basil over again, save that the tow-coloured hair was put back with a round comb, and the gray eyes widely opened, instead of half shut, when she looked at any one. All three children were neatly dressed, and all looked as if they were not used to their clothes.

"Well," said Mr. Montfort at last, after a long, silent look at each one in turn, "I am very glad to see you, children. I hope we are going to be good friends. Boys, I was a boy myself, just two or three years ago, — or it may be four, — so you can ask me about anything you want to know. Susan, I never was a girl, you see, but that need not make

much difference. Your Cousin Margaret — oh, here *is* your Cousin Margaret! She will be good to you, and — and in short, you are all very welcome to Fernley, and there is a swing in the garden, and the rest you can find out for yourselves."

Margaret came forward, and shook hands with the boys, and kissed the little girl warmly. Evidently Susan D. was not used to being kissed, for she blushed, and her brothers giggled rather rudely, till they caught Mr. Montfort's eye, and stopped.

"Young gentlemen," said Uncle John, with an emphasis which brought the blood to Basil's cheek, "dinner will be ready" — he looked at his watch — "in an hour. I daresay they would like something now, Margaret; crackers and cheese, gingerbread, — what? You'll find them something." Mr. Montfort nodded kindly, and strode away to his study. Margaret was left alone with the three strange children, feeling shyer than ever before in her life. The meeting with the three cousins of her own age, two years ago, was nothing to this.

"Are you hungry, boys?" she asked.

"Starving!" said Merton.

"He isn't," said Susan D. "He's been eating all the way, ever since we left home. He's a greedy,—that's what he is." Then, scared at her own voice, she hung her head down, and put her finger in her mouth.

"Oh, well," said Margaret, "I daresay you would all be hungry before dinner-time, so suppose we come into the pantry and see what we can find. Will you come with me, Susan, dear?" She held out her hand, but the little girl evaded it, and followed in the rear, holding her own hands behind her back.

"Will you call me Cousin Margaret?" the girl went on. "And shall I call you Susie, or do you like Susan better?"

Susan not replying, Basil replied for her. "Susan D. we call her; but Puppa calls her Sudden Death when she acts bad; she mostly does act bad."

"Don't neither!" muttered Susan D., scowling.

"Do teither!" retorted both brothers in a breath.

"She ain't shy!" Basil went on. "She's sulky, that's all. Merton's shy, and I ain't. I'll tell you things, when you ask me; they won't, half the time."

"Well, I haven't asked you anything, yet, have I?" said Margaret, smiling, and feeling more at ease with this boy, somehow, than with either of the others. "What can you tell me that is pleasant about them?"

"That's so!" said Basil, and his lips parted suddenly in a smile that positively transfigured his plain face. "Well, Mert's the best boxer, and he can sing and draw. I'm the best runner, of course, 'count of my legs being long, you see." He held up a long, thin leg for Margaret's inspection. "Some fellows called me Spider once, and Susan D. scratched their faces for 'em. She's great at scratching, Susan D. is."

"My dear!" said poor Margaret. "I thought you were going to tell me the pleasant things, Basil."

"Ain't I?" said the boy, innocently. "She was standing up for me, you see. She always stands up for me; Mert is a sne— well, what

I was going to say, she's a pretty good runner, for a girl, and she can shin a rope too, better than any of us. Mert can hang on longest with his teeth."

"What *do* you mean, child?" cried Margaret, laughing. Basil flashed his brilliant smile on her again.

"Tables," he explained. "Yes, please, crackers; and quite a lot of cheese, please."

"Greedy Gobble!" interjected Merton.

"Well, I like that!" said Basil. "Who ate my sandwich, when I was looking out of window? I tell you what, I'd punch your head for two cents, young feller!"

"Boys," said Margaret, decidedly, "I cannot have this! While you are with me, I expect you to behave decently."

"Yes, ma'am!" said both boys, with ready cheerfulness; and Basil continued his explanation.

"We see which can hang on to a table longest, don't you know, by your teeth. Did ever you?"

"No, I certainly never did; and — I don't think you'd better try it here, Basil. It must

be very hard on your teeth, besides ruining the table."

"It ain't healthy for the table," Basil admitted. "You ought to see the tables at home! It makes like a little pattern round the edge, sometimes. Quite pretty, I think. Say, are you the boss here?"

Seated on the pantry dresser, swinging his legs, the young gentleman seemed as much at home as if he had spent his life at Fernley. The two other children were eating hastily and furtively, as if they feared each bite might be their last. Basil crunched his crackers and nibbled his cheese with an air of perfect unconcern. "Are you the boss here?" he repeated.

"Am I in authority, do you mean?" asked Margaret, who could not abide slang of any kind. "No, indeed, Basil. Your Uncle John is the head of the house, in every possible way. I hope you are all going to be very good and obedient. He is the kindest, best man in the whole world."

"I think he's bully," said Basil. "I guess you're bully too, ain't you? And it's a bully

place. Hi, Mert, there's a squirrel! Look at him running up that tree. My! Wish I had a pea-shooter!"

"Bet you couldn't hit him if you had!" cried Merton, as all three children watched the squirrel with breathless interest.

"Bet I could!" said Basil, contemptuously.

"Guess he could hit it when you couldn't hit a barn in the next county!" cried Susan D. in a kind of small shriek; then she caught Margaret's eye, blushed furiously, and tried to get behind her bread and butter.

"I say! can we go out in the garden?" cried Basil.

"Yes, indeed, but wouldn't you like to come up and see your rooms first? Such pleasant rooms! I am sure you will like them."

But none of the children cared to see the pleasant rooms. Receiving permission to play till they heard the dinner-bell, they fled suddenly, as if the constable were at their heels. Margaret saw their legs twinkling across the grass-plot. They were yelling like red Indians. Susan D.'s hat blew off at the

third bound; Basil shied his cap into a bush with a joyous whoop, then snatched off his brother's and threw that after it. Merton grappled him with a shout, and they rolled over and over at the feet of their sister, who bent down and pummelled them both with might and main, shrieking with excitement. As Margaret gazed aghast, preparing to fly and interfere, she heard a quiet laugh behind her, and turning, saw Mr. Montfort looking over her shoulder.

"Battle, Murder, and Sudden Death!" he said. "Separate them? On no account, my dear! They have been shut up for hours, and their muscles need stretching. Don't be alarmed, my child; I know this kind." Poor Margaret sighed. She did not know this kind.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIRST CONQUEST.

When Margaret went to bed that night, she felt as if she had been whipped with rods. Head, heart, and back, all ached in sympathy. The children were in bed; that is, she had left them in bed; their staying there was another matter; however, all three were tired after their journey, and Uncle John thought the chances were that they would fall asleep before they had time to think of doing anything else. Among the three, the little girl was the one who oppressed Margaret with a sense of defeat, a sense of her own incompetence. She had not expected to understand the boys; she had never had any experience of boys; but she had expected to win the little girl to her, and make her a little friend, perhaps almost a sister. Susan D. received her advances with an elfish coldness that

had something not human in it, Margaret thought. The child was like a changeling, in the old fairy stories. That evening, when bedtime came, Margaret went up with her to the pretty room, hoping for a pleasant time. She sat down and took the little girl on her knee. "Let us have a cuddle, dear!" she said; "put your head down on my shoulder, and I will sing you one of my own bedtime songs, that my nurse used to sing to me."

Susan D. sat bold upright, not a yielding joint in all her body.

"Don't you like songs?" asked Margaret, stroking the tow-coloured hair gently.

"No!" said the child; and with the word she wriggled off Margaret's lap, and stood twisting her fingers awkwardly, and frowning at the floor. Margaret sighed.

"Then we will undress and get to bed," she said, trying to speak lightly. "You must be very tired, little girl. Isn't that a pretty bed? Is your bed at home like this? Tell me about your room, won't you, Susie?"

But Susan D. still twisted her fingers and

frowned, and would not say a single word. She made no resistance, however, when Margaret helped her off with her clothes. "You are big enough to undress yourself, of course," the girl said, "but I will help you to-night, because you are tired, and you must feel strange, coming so far away from home. Poor little mite!" The child looked so small and slight, standing with her dress off, and her thin shoulders sticking out like wings, that Margaret felt a sudden thrill of compassion, and stooping, kissed the freckled cheek warmly. The colour came into the child's face, but she stood like a stock, never moving a muscle, never raising her eyes to take note of the pretty, tasteful arrangements to which Margaret had given such thought and pains. But the undressing went on, and presently she was in her little nightgown, with her hair unbraided and smoothly brushed. She might be pretty, Margaret decided, when she filled out a little, and had a pleasanter expression. She was so little! Surely there must be one more effort, this first night.

"Shall I hear you say your prayers, dear?" asked Margaret, taking the child's two hands in hers. Susan D. shook her head resolutely.

"No? You like better to say them by yourself? Then I will come back in a few minutes, and tuck you up in your little nest."

The child gave no sign; and when Margaret came back, she was standing in the same spot, in the same position. She got into bed obediently, and made no resistance when Margaret tucked the bedclothes in, patted her shoulder, and gave her a last good-night kiss. She might as well have kissed the pillow for any response there was, but at least there had been no shrinking this time. "Good night, Susan D.," said Margaret, cheerfully, pausing at the door. "Good night, dear! Susan, I think you must answer when you are spoken to."

"Good night!" said Susan D. Margaret shut the door softly and went away. As she passed along the corridor that ran round the hall, something struck her forehead lightly. She looked up, and narrowly escaped getting a fish-hook in her eye. Mer-

ton looked over the banisters, and smiled appealingly. "I was fishin'," he said. "There's fish-lines in the drawers of the sofa. I guess I 'most caught a whale, didn't I?"

"Merton, you must go to bed at once!" said Margaret. "How long have you been standing there in your nightgown? You might catch your death." (It had been one of old Katy's maxims that if you stood about in your nightgown for however short a time, you inevitably got your death. Margaret had never doubted it till this moment.) "I am coming up now to tuck you both up!" she added, with a happy inspiration.

There was a hasty scuffle, then a rush, accompanied by smothered squeals. When Margaret reached the nursery, both boys were in bed. Merton's blue eyes were wide open, and fixed on her with mournful earnestness; Basil was asleep, the clothes tucked in well under his chin. He lay on his back, his mouth slightly opened; he was snoring gently, but unobtrusively. Poor child! no doubt he was tired enough. But how had Merton managed to make so *much* noise?

Margaret looked around her, and Merton's gaze grew more intense. His own clothes lay in a heap on the floor, but where were his brother's? And — and what was that, smoothly folded over the back of a chair? A clean nightgown?

But when Merton saw his cousin's eyes fix on the nightgown, he exploded in a bubbling laugh. "He — he ain't undressed at all!" he cried, gleefully. "He never! he's got his boots on, and every single — " The speech got no further. There was a flying whirl of blankets, a leap, and Basil was on his brother's chest, pounding him with right good will. "You sneak!" he cried. I'll teach you — "

There was no time to think; the child would be killed before her eyes. Margaret took a firm hold on Basil's collar, and dragged him off by main strength, he still clawing the air. Unconsciously, she gave him a hearty shake before she let go; the boy staggered back a few paces; who would have thought that Margaret had such strength in her slender wrists? The crisis over, she panted, and felt faint for an instant; Basil, after a moment

of bewilderment, looked at her, and the smile broke all over his face, a moment before black with rage.

"Got me that time, didn't you?" he said, simply. "He's a mean sneak, Mert is. I'll serve him out to-morrow, don't you be afraid!"

"Basil, what does this mean?" asked Margaret, severely. "Why are you not in bed?" Then as Basil sent an eloquent glance at the pillow where his head had been lying so quietly, she added, "Why are you not undressed, I mean? I am afraid you have been very naughty, both of you, boys."

"Well, you see," said Basil, apologetically, "there was all kinds of things in the drawers, and then I got on the rocking-horse, and it wasn't but just a minute before you came up. I say, isn't this a bully room, Cousin Margaret? I think Uncle John was awfully good to give us such a room as this. Why doesn't he sleep here himself? Bet I would, if I owned the house. I say, do those marbles belong to him?"

"I suppose so," said Margaret, smiling in

spite of herself; "yes, I am sure they were his. But now, Basil, — "

"Well, see here!" cried the boy, excitedly. "Because, you see, they're worth a lot, some of 'em. Why, there's agates, — why, they are perfect beauties! Just look!" He ran towards the sofa, but Margaret stopped him resolutely.

"To-morrow, Basil!" she said. "To-morrow you shall show me everything you like; but now you must go to bed, this very moment. I am pretty tired, but I shall sit outside on the landing, till you tell me that you are in bed; then I shall come in and make sure for myself, and tuck you in."

Basil illuminated the room again. "Will you?" he cried. "Honest, will you tuck us in?"

Margaret nodded, wondering, and withdrew to the landing, where she sat with her head in her hands, saying to herself, "Let nothing disturb thee, nothing affright thee — "

Basil spoke through the keyhole. "Cousin Margaret!"

"Yes, Basil; are you ready so soon?"

"No, not quite. I wanted to say, — do you think you ought to spank me?"

"No, certainly not, my dear!"

"'Cause you can, if you think you'd better."

"No, no, Basil; only do get to bed, like a good boy!"

"Yes, ma'am."

A sudden plunge was heard, a thump, and the agonised shriek of a suffering bedstead. "Now I'm in bed!" said Basil. Margaret picked up the two heaps of clothing, and laid them neatly on two chairs. "I want you to do this yourselves after this," she explained. "It isn't nice to leave your things on the floor."

"All right!" "We will!" said both boys; and then they joined in a fervent appeal to her not to turn their knickerbockers upside down. "'Cause all the things in your pockets spill out," said Merton.

"And then you get 'em mixed, and can't tell what belongs where," cried Basil. "Thank you, Cousin Margaret; that's bully!"

Margaret tucked Merton in first; he looked so dimpled and pretty, she was tempted to offer a caress, but the recollection of Susan D.

kept her from it. Turning away, she came to Basil's bed. The boy watched her intently as she smoothed the bedclothes with practised hand, and tucked them in exactly right, not too tight and not too loose. There are several ways of tucking a person into bed. With a pleasant "Good night!" she was about to leave him, but something in the boy's face held her. "Is there anything you want, my dear?" she asked, gently. Basil looked at her; then turned his head away. "Mother used to put me to bed!" he muttered, so low that Margaret could hardly hear. She did hear, however; and instantly stooping over the boy, she kissed him warmly. Thank Heaven, here was one who did want to be loved. "Dear Basil," she said, tenderly. "Dear boy, you shall tell me all about her some day. Will you?" The boy nodded; his eyes were eloquent, but he did not speak. Her heart still warm, Margaret looked across at Merton; but Basil plucked her gown and whispered, "He — doesn't know. He can't remember her. Perhaps you can teach him —"

Margaret nodded, kissed the boy's white forehead once more, and went away with a lighter heart than she had brought with her. On the floor below she paused to listen at Susan's door; all was quiet there. Cousin Sophronia was asleep, too, no doubt; Margaret had spent part of the evening with her, reading, and listening to her doleful prophecies of the miseries entailed by the coming of "these dreadful children!" It was nearly her own bedtime, too, for between Cousin Sophronia and the children the evening had slipped away all too fast. But surely she might have a few minutes of peace and joy? The library door stood open; from it there came a stream of cheerful light, and the perfume of a Manila cigar. Oh, good! Uncle John had not gone to his study; he was waiting for her. As she passed Miss Sophronia's door, Margaret fancied she heard a call; but she was not sure, and for once she was rebellious. She flew down-stairs, and ran into the library.

The pleasant room lay in shade, save for the bright gleam of the reading-lamp. Among the books which lined the walls from floor to

ceiling, the gilded backs of the smaller volumes caught the light and sent it back in soft, broken twinklings; but the great brown folios on the lower shelves were half lost in a comfortable duskiness. The crimson curtains were drawn before the open windows, and the evening wind waved them lightly now and then, sending new shadows to chase the old ones along the walls and ceiling. The thick old Turkey carpet held every possible shade of soft, faded richness, and the brown leather armchairs looked as if they had been sat in by generations of book-loving Montforts, as indeed they had. And amid all this sober comfort, by the great library table with its orderly litter of magazines and new books, sat Mr. John Montfort, book in hand and cigar in mouth, a breathing statue of Ease, in a brown velvet smoking-jacket. He looked up, and, seeing Margaret in the doorway, laid down his book, and held out his hand with a gesture of welcome. "Well, my girl," he said, "come and tell me all about it!"

With a great sigh of relief, Margaret dropped on the rug at her uncle's feet, and

laid her tired head on his knee. "Uncle John!" she said. "Oh, Uncle John!" That seemed to be all she wanted to say; she shut her eyes, and gave herself up to the comfort which only comes with rest after fatigue.

Mr. Montfort stroked her hair gently, with a touch as light as a woman's. Then he took up his book again, and began to read aloud. It was a curious old book, bound in black leather, with great silver clasps.

"In that isle is a dead sea or lake, that has no bottom; and if any thing falls into it, it will never come up again. In that lake grow reeds, which they call Thaby, that are thirty fathoms long; and of these reeds they make fair houses. And there are other reeds, not so long, that grow near the land, and have roots full a quarter of a furlong long or more, at the knots of which roots precious stones are found that have great virtues; for he who carries any of them upon him may not be hurt by iron or steel; and therefore they who have those stones on them fight very boldly both by sea and land; and therefore, when their enemies are aware of this, they shoot at them darts without iron or steel, and so hurt and slay them. And also of those reeds they make houses and ships and other things, as we here make

houses and ships of oak, or of any other tree. And let no man think I am joking, for I have seen these reeds with my own eyes."

The words flowed on and on; Margaret felt her troubles smoothing themselves out, melting away. "Who is this pleasant person?" she asked, without raising her head.

"Sir John Mandeville," said her uncle. "Rest a bit still, and we'll go and see the Chan of Cathay with him. Here we are!" He turned a page or two, and read again:

"The emperor has his table alone by himself, which is of gold and precious stones; or of crystal, bordered with gold and full of precious stones; or of amethysts, or of lignum aloes, that comes out of Paradise; or of ivory bound or bordered with gold. And under the emperor's table sit four clerks, who write all that the emperor says, be it good or evil; for all that he says must be held good; for he may not change his word nor revoke it."

"Oh, but I shouldn't like that, Uncle John!" cried Margaret. "I shouldn't like that at all! Should you?"

"I don't think it would be agreeable," Mr.

Montfort admitted. "But when we come to anything we don't like, we can suppose that Sir John was — shall we call it embroidering? And how does my girl feel now? Are the wrinkles smoothing out at all?"

"All smooth!" replied the girl. "All gone, Uncle John. I was only a little tired; and — Uncle John —"

"Yes, dear child."

"You must expect that I shall do a great many wrong things, at first. I am very ignorant, and — well, not very old, perhaps. If only I can make the children love me!"

"They'd better love you," said Uncle John. "If they don't, they'll get the stick. But don't fret, Margaret; I am not going to fret, and I shall not let you do it. The little girl seems slightly abnormal, at first sight; but the boys —"

"Yes, Uncle John?" and Margaret raised her head and looked eagerly at her uncle, hoping for some light that would make all clear to her. "The boys?"

"Why, the boys are just boys, my dear; nothing in the world but plain boys. Two of

'em instead of four, — thank your stars that you are in this generation instead of the last, my love ; and now take this little head off to bed, and don't let another anxious thought come into it. Good night, my child."

CHAPTER IX.

A NEWCOMER.

"If you please, Miss Margaret, the lady would like to speak to you, in her room."

"Miss Montfort?" (Elizabeth never would call Miss Sophronia Miss Montfort.) "Yes, Elizabeth, I will be up in a moment; tell her, please."

Hastily pinning her collar, — it was near breakfast-time, and she had been longer than usual in dressing, — Margaret ran up to the Blue Room. Miss Sophronia, in curl-papers and a long, yellow wrapper, was standing near the window, apparently rigid with horror.

"What is it, Cousin Sophronia? What can I do for you?"

"Margaret, I told you, — I warned you. I warned John Montfort. No one can say that I neglected my duty in this respect; my conscience is clear. Now look, — I desire

you, look out of that window, and tell me what you think."

Margaret looked. At first she saw nothing but the clear glass, and, beyond it, the blue sky and waving trees. But, looking again, she became aware of two objects dangling over the upper part of the pane; a black object, and a white object; two small legs, one bare, the other in stocking and shoe. The legs were swinging back and forth, keeping time to a clear and lively whistle, and now and then one of them gave a little kick, as of pure content.

"Do you see?" demanded Miss Sophronia, in tragic tone.

"Yes, Cousin Sophronia, I see. I can't think — but I'll run up at once and see what it means, and bring the child down. I —" Margaret waited to say no more, but flew up-stairs, only pausing to cast a hasty glance into Susan D.'s room, the door of which stood open. The room was empty; so, when she reached the top of the stairs, was the nursery. She entered a small room that was used as a storeroom; its one window

looked directly on the roof, and this window stood wide open. Running to look out, Margaret saw Susan D., seated astride of a gable, dangling her legs as aforesaid, and apparently enjoying herself immensely. The whistle stopped when she saw her cousin, and the cheerful look gave place to one of sullenness.

"Susan, my dear child, what are you doing here?"

"Looking for my other stocking," replied the child.

"Your stocking?"

"Yes. I dropped it out of the window, and I came up here to look for it."

"She thought she could see better!" explained Basil, appearing suddenly from behind the chimney. "I — good morning, Cousin Margaret. I slept very well, thank you."

"So did I!" chimed in Susan D., with suspicious readiness. "I slept very well. Good morning, Cousin Margaret, thank you!"

"That isn't right," said Basil, as Mar-

garet looked in bewilderment from one to the other; "you are such a stupid, Susan D. You see," he added, turning to Margaret. "I've been telling her that she's got to have better manners, and speak when she's spoken to; and, if she behaves pretty well, she's going to get some hard stamps she wants; and if she doesn't — "

"I am," said Susan D. "Amn't I, Cousin Margaret?"

It was the first time the child had addressed Margaret directly, and the latter hastened to assure her that her morning greeting would do very well indeed. "But, dear children," she cried, "I cannot let you stay here. Indeed, you ought never to have come up; I don't believe Uncle John would like to have you on the roof at all; and it is breakfast-time, and Cousin Sophronia has been a good deal frightened, Susie, at seeing your legs dangling over her window in this fashion."

"We aren't hurting the old roof!" cried boy and girl, in eager self-defence.

"Oh, my dears! It isn't the roof, it's

your precious necks, that you might be breaking at this moment. How are you going to get back? Basil, it makes me dizzy to look at you."

"Then I wouldn't look," said Basil, cheerfully. "I'm all right, Cousin Margaret, just truly I am. Why, I just live on roofs, every chance I get. And this is a bully roof to climb on."

Margaret covered her eyes with her hands, as the boy came tripping along the ridge-pole towards her; but the next moment she put the hands down resolutely. "Let me help you!" she said. "Susan, take my hand, dear, and let me help you in."

But Susan D. needed no helping hand; she scrambled up the slope of the roof like a squirrel, and wriggled in at the window before Margaret could lay hands on her. "I'm all right!" she said, shyly. "I didn't find my stocking, though. I'll get another pair." But Margaret soon found the stocking, and in due time could report to Cousin Sophronia that the children were both safe on the ground, and more or less ready for

breakfast. Merton had not shared in the roof expedition; he had climbed the great chestnut-tree instead, and appeared at breakfast with most of the buttons off his jacket, and a large barn-door tear in his knickerbockers.

Miss Sophronia greeted the children with firmness. "How do you do, my dears?" she said. "I am your Cousin Sophronia, and I shall take the place of a mamma to you while you are here. If you do as I tell you, we shall get on very well, I dare say. You are Basil? Yes, you look like your Uncle Reuben. You remember Reuben, John? What a troublesome boy he was, to be sure! And this is Merton. H'm! Yes! The image of his father. Anthony; to be sure! And what is your name, child? Susan D.? Ah, yes! For your Aunt Susan, of course. And are you a good girl, Susan D.?"

Susan D. hung her head, and looked defiant.

"Always answer when you are spoken to," said the lady, with mild severity. "I'm afraid your father has let you run wild, but we will alter all that. Little boy — Merton, I mean,

you are taking too much sugar on your porridge. Too much sugar is very bad for children. Hand me the bowl, if you please. I am obliged to take a good deal of sugar — the doctor's orders! There are one — two — three buttons off your jacket. This will never do!"

"I scraped 'em off, shinning up the tree," said Merton, sadly. "I barked all my shins, too; but I found the squirrel's nest."

"Oh, Merton, you didn't meddle with it?" cried Margaret. "That little squirrel is so tame, I should be very sorry to have him teased. You didn't tease him, did you, dear?"

Merton looked injured. "I just put my hand into his old hole, and he bit me, nasty thing! I'll kill him, first chance I get."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said Mr. Montfort, quietly. "You will let the squirrel alone, Merton, or I shall have to stop the climbing altogether. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Merton. "Ow! you stop that, now!"

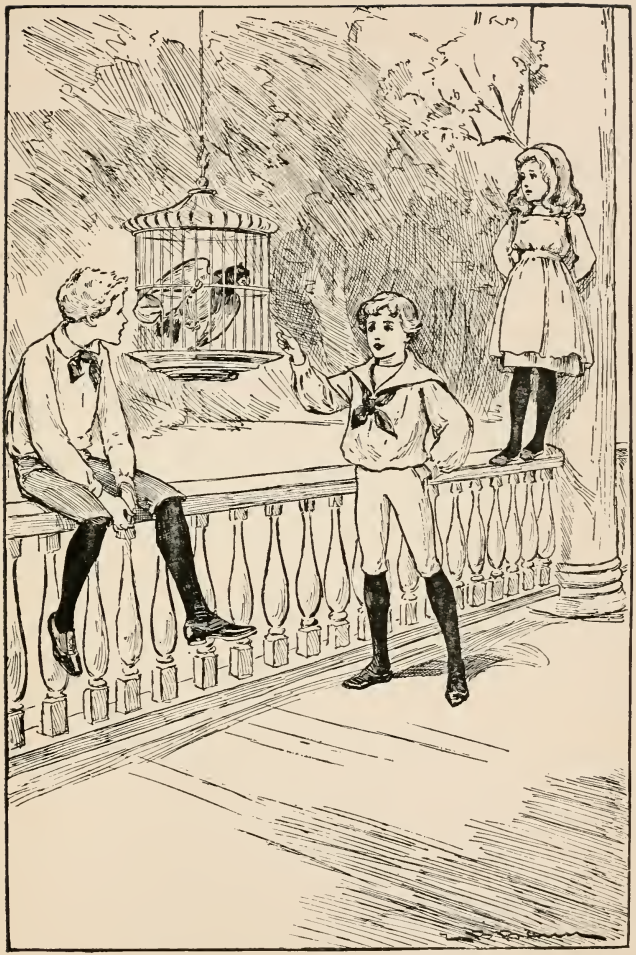
"Did you speak to me, sir?" inquired Mr. Montfort, politely.

"Well, he kicked my sore shin," growled Merton, glaring savagely at Basil. Basil chuckled gleefully. Mr. Montfort looked from one to the other.

"Kick each other as much as you like out-of-doors," he said. "Here, you can either behave yourselves or leave the table. Take your choice." He spoke very quietly, and went on with his letter, without another glance at the boys; indeed, no second glance was needed, for the children behaved remarkably well through the rest of breakfast.

That morning was a trying time for Margaret. She tried hard to remember her uncle's parting words, as he drove away: "Let them run, these first few days, and don't worry; above all, don't worry!"

Yes, but how could she help worrying? If it had been only running! But these children never seemed content to stay on their feet for ten minutes together. Now they were turning somersaults round and round the grass-plot, till her head grew dizzy, and Cousin



"MERTON WAS TEASING CHIQUITO."

Sophronia screamed from the window that they would all be dead of apoplexy in less than ten minutes. Now they were hanging by their heels from the lower branches of the horse-chestnut tree, daring each other to turn a somersault in the air and so descend. Now Merton was teasing Chiquito, and getting his finger bitten, and howling, while Basil jeered at him, and wanted to know whether a sixty-year-old bird was likely to stand "sauce" from a ten-year-old monkey. Now Susan D. had caught her frock on a bramble, and torn a long, jagged rent across the front breadth, that filled Margaret with despair. Poor Susan D.! By afternoon, Miss Sophronia had taken her into custody, and marched her off to her own room, to stay there till bedtime.

"The child was rebellious, my dear Margaret; positively disrespectful. A little discipline, my love, is what that child needs. It is my duty to give it to her, and I shall do my duty cheerfully. At your age, it is not to be expected that you should know anything about children. Leave all to me, and you will be

surprised at the result. A firm rein for a few weeks, — I shall manage her, never fear!"

Margaret was humble-minded, and fully conscious of her total lack of experience; still, she could not feel that a system of repression was the one most likely to succeed with Susan D.

"If we could win the child's affection," she began, timidly. Miss Sophronia pounced upon her.

"My love, you naturally think so! Believe me, I know what I am talking about. I have practically brought up William's children; the result is astonishing, everybody says so." (Everybody did, but their astonishment was hardly what the good lady fancied it.) "Trust, — dearest Margaret, simply confide absolutely in me! So important, I always say, for the young to have entire confidence in their elders."

Margaret was thankful when dinner was over, and her cousin gone to take her afternoon nap. Basil was in a lowering mood, the result of his sister's imprisonment. He would do nothing but rage against Cousin

Sophronia, so Margaret was finally obliged to send him away, and sit down with a sigh to her work, alone.

It was very pleasant and peaceful on the verandah. The garden was hot and sunny at this hour, but here the shade lay cool and grateful, and Margaret felt the silence like balm on her fretted spirit. It was all wrong that she should be so fretted; she argued with herself, scolded, tried to bring herself to a better frame of mind; but nature was too strong for her, and the best she could do was to resolve that she would try, and keep on trying, her very best; and that Uncle John should not know how worried she was. That, surely, she could manage: to keep a smiling face when he was at home, and to made light of all these hourly pin-pricks that seemed to her sensitive nature like sword-thrusts.

So quiet! Only the sound of the soft wind in the great chestnut-trees, and the clear notes of a bird in the upper branches. A rose-breasted grosbeak! Her uncle had been teaching her something about birds, and she knew this beautiful creature, and loved to

watch him as he hovered about the nest where his good wife sat. His song was almost like the oriole's, Margaret thought. She laid down her embroidery, and watched the flashes of crimson appear and disappear. What a wonderful, beautiful thing! How good to live in the green country, where lovely sights and sounds were one's own, all day long. Why should one let oneself be distressed, even if things did not go just to one's mind?

A soft cloud seemed to be stealing over her spirit; it was not sleep, but just a waking dream, of peace and beauty, and the love of all lovely things in the green and blossoming world, where life floated by to the music of birds, —

"I beg your pardon, Miss Margaret; were you asleep, miss?"

Margaret sat upright, and looked a little severe. It would never do even to look as if she had been asleep, in the middle of the afternoon. "No, Elizabeth," she said. "What is wanted?"

"Only miss, Frances was wishful to know

whether she should keep Master Merton's dinner any longer, or whether she'd cook something fresh for him along with his supper."

No more dreaming for Margaret! She sprang to her feet, suddenly conscious of the fact that Merton had not been seen for several hours. It could not have been more than eleven o'clock when he was in her room; now — "What time is it, Elizabeth?"

"Going on five, Miss Margaret. Mr. Montfort'll soon be here, miss; maybe Master Merton might have gone to meet him."

Margaret shook her head; that did not seem at all likely. She hailed Basil, who came sauntering up the gravel walk, his brow still clouded, kicking the pebbles before him.

"Oh, Basil, have you seen Merton? He has not been in the house since this morning, and I am anxious about him."

Basil shrugged his shoulders. "Run away, most likely!" he said, carelessly. "He's always running away, Mert is."

"Always running away! But where could he run to, Basil? He does not know his way

about here. He surely would not run away in a strange place."

Basil smiled superior. "That's just why he'd do it. He likes to find out new places; we both do. I wouldn't leave Susan D., or I'd have gone, too, bet I would. No use staying here, to be bossed round."

"Oh, Basil, don't talk so, but help me, like a dear boy, to find Merton."

Basil stood uncertain. He raised a threatening glance towards Miss Sophronia's window; but Margaret was beside him in a moment. "Basil, to please me!" she said. She laid her hand on the boy's shoulder. He stood still, and Margaret had a moment of painful doubt; but the next instant he raised his face to her with his own enchanting smile. "All right!" he said. "You are all right, Cousin Margaret, whatever other folks are, and I'll help you every single bit I can."

"That's my good, helpful boy!" said Margaret, heartily. "Oh, Basil, you and I together can do a great deal, but alone I feel rather helpless. You shall be my little — no, not little — you shall be my brother, and

tell me how to manage Merton and Susan, and make them love me. But the first thing is to find Merton. What can have become of the child? Where shall we look for him?"

"I think perhaps down by the bog," said Basil, looking very important and pleased with his new responsibility. "He said he was going down there, first chance he got. I meant to go, too, but I won't if you don't want me to, Cousin Margaret. There's a bully —"

"Basil!"

"There's a — a superb workman down there; do you know him, Cousin Margaret? I guess he's the boss, or something. He wears blue overalls and a blue jumper, and he can vault — oh my! how that fellow can vault!"

"Basil, I don't feel at all sure that your uncle would wish you to be talking with strange workmen. At any rate, I think you ought to ask leave, don't you?"

"Maybe I ought!" said Basil, cheerfully. "But it's too late now, you see, 'cause I have talked to him, quite lots, and he's awfully jolly. Oh, Jonah! I do believe there he is

now; and — Cousin Margaret! I do believe he's got Mert with him! Look!"

Margaret looked. A man was coming across the field that lay beyond the garden wall; a workingman, from his blue overalls and jumper; a young man, from the way he moved, and from his light, springy step. Margaret could not see his face, but his hair was red; she could see that over the burden that he carried in his arms.

Coming nearer, this burden was seen to be a child. A chimney-sweeper? No, for chimney-sweepers are not necessarily wet; do not drip black mud from head to foot; do not run streams of black bog water.

"Merton!" cried poor Margaret, who knew well the look of that mud and water. "Oh, what has happened? Is — is he hurt?" she cried out, running towards the wall.

The young workman raised a cheerful face, streaked with black, and presenting the appearance of a light-hearted savage in trim for a funeral.

"Not a bit hurt!" he called in return. "All right, only wet, and a trifle muddy.

Little chap's had a bath, that's all. Hope you haven't been anxious about him."

"Oh, yes, I have been anxious — thank you! You are sure — he has not been in danger?"

"Well," the stranger admitted, "just as well I was there, perhaps. It isn't a safe place for children, you see. How are you now, old chap? He was a bit dizzy when I picked him up, you see."

Merton lifted his black head, and looked ruefully at Margaret.

"You told me not to go!" he said. "I won't go again."

"Well, I guess you won't!" cried Basil, excitedly. "Why, you've been in all over; it's all up to your chin, and some of it's on the back of your head. I say, you must — "

The young man made him a sign quickly. "He's all right!" he said. "Mud baths extremely hygienic; recommended by the medical fraternity; a — where did you say I should put him?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" cried Margaret. "I am letting you hold him all this time, and you are getting all wet, too."

"No consequence, not the least in the world. Besides, — past participle perhaps more appropriate than present."

Margaret led the way to the verandah, and the stranger finally deposited his burden on the steps. Looking down at himself, he seemed for the first time aware of his singular appearance, for he blushed, and, lifting his cap, was turning away with a muttered apology, in which the word "clothes" was the only word Margaret could hear.

"Oh!" she cried, "you are not going yet! I — I have not thanked you! You have saved the child's life, I know you have. I — I have seen something of that bog," she shuddered. "Mr. Montfort will want to see you, and thank you himself. Do at least tell me your name, so that we may know who it is that has done us this great service."

But here the young man caught sight of his face, reflected in a window-pane, and lost the last vestige of self-possession. "If — if you'll excuse me," he cried, "I think I'll go before Mr. Montfort comes. The costume of a Mohawk on the war-path — effective, but unusual;

a — call to-morrow if I may, to see if the little chap is all right. Mr. Montfort kindly asked me — good day!"

"But you haven't told her your name!" Basil shouted after him.

"Oh! Of course! — a — Merryweather! Gerald Merryweather."

CHAPTER X.

"I MUST HELP MYSELF."

"DEAR MARGARET:

"I find a telegram here which obliges me to run on to Philadelphia at once. I may be away all the week; do as well as you can, dear child, and don't let B., M., and S. D. tear you to pieces. I forgot to tell you that the young man in charge of the bog-draining turns out to be the son of an old friend of mine, Miles Merryweather. I asked him to come up to the house; if he should come while I am away, you will be good to him. I will let you know by telegraph when to expect me.

"Always affectionately yours,

"JOHN MONTFORT."

Margaret read this brief letter with a sinking heart. How was she to keep up without Uncle John? How was she to cope with all the difficulties that beset her path like sharp-thorned briers? If she had but Aunt Faith —

if she had but some one to turn to! She had tried to take counsel with Mrs. Peyton, but the beautiful woman was still, at fifty, a spoiled child, far younger in many ways than Margaret herself; she would only laugh, and advise her to get rid of Miss Sophronia by some trick, or practical joke.

"Freeze her out, my dear! Get rid of her, somehow! That is all the advice I can give you. And bring the young barbarians to see me; I am sure they will amuse me."

Margaret had just been acting on this last request. She had taken the two boys to see the invalid, and had left them there now, coming away with a sore and angry heart. Mrs. Peyton had been drawing the children out, laughing at their remarks about their cousin, and paying no regard to Margaret's entreaties. At length Margaret had simply come away, with no more than a brief "Good afternoon!" feeling that she could not trust herself to say more. Emily Peyton only laughed; she had full confidence in her charm, and thought she could bring back her puritanical little friend whenever she chose to smile in a particular

way; meanwhile, the children were a new toy, and amused her.

But Margaret felt that she had had almost enough of Mrs. Peyton. Beauty was a great deal, charm and grace were a great deal more; but they did not take the place of heart. No, there was no one to help her! Well, then she must help herself, that was all!

She stood still, her mind full of this new thought. She was eighteen years old; she was well and strong, and possessed of average intelligence. "Look here!" she said suddenly, aloud. "If you cannot manage those children, why, I am ashamed of you. Do you hear?"

The other self, the timid one, did hear, and took heart. The girl felt new strength coming to her. The world had changed, somehow; the giants, — were they only windmills, after all? Up, lance, and at them!

In this changed mood she went on, humming a little song to herself. As she drew near the wood that skirted the bog, the song was answered by another, trolled in a cheerful bass voice:

"The lady was pleased for to see him so bold;
She gave him her glove that was flowered with gold;
She said she had found it while walking around,
As she was a-hunting with her dog and her gun."

The "blue boy," as she mentally called him, came dancing out of the wood, throwing up his cap, and singing as he came. At sight of Margaret he paused, in some confusion, cap in hand.

"I — I beg your pardon," he said. "I trust I did not disturb you with my carol? There isn't generally any one here, you know; I get rather to feel as if it all belonged to me. I hope the little chap is all right to-day, Miss — Is it Miss Montfort?"

"Oh, yes! Certainly!" said Margaret, blushing in her turn. "I ought to have said, of course — yes, thank you, Mr. Merryweather, Merton is quite well to-day; and I really think he has had a lesson, for he has not run away since, and it is two or three days ago. I — my uncle has been suddenly called away on business, but he asked me to say — that is, we shall be very glad to see you at the house any day; Miss Montfort, his cousin, — my uncle's

cousin, — is there with me and the children."

"Thanks awfully," murmured Gerald. "I'd like to come ever so much, some day; but I keep all in a mess so — " he glanced down ruefully at his blue clothes, and finding them quite respectably clean, brightened visibly. "My father was at school with Mr. Montfort; Miles Merryweather, perhaps he told you, Miss Montfort?"

"Yes, he told me. I — I always think Uncle John must have been such a delightful boy. I am sure they must have had good times together."

"So was the Pater, no end; I mean, my father was an agreeable youth also." Gerald stopped short, and glanced sidelong at the young girl. He was well used to girls, having sisters and cousins; but they were used to him, too, and he somehow felt that this sweet, serious-looking maiden was not accustomed to young men, and that he must, as he silently put it to himself, "consider the prudent P, and the quaintly quiggling Q."

"And Uncle John must have been a bril-

liant scholar!" Margaret went on, warming to her subject. She had never, as it happened, walked and talked with a lad before in her quiet life; she did not know quite how to do it, but so long as she talked about Uncle John, she could not go wrong. "He knows so much, —so much that he must have learned early, because it is so a part of him. Wasn't he head of his class most of the time? He never will talk about it, but I am sure he must have been."

"I am not so sure about that," Gerald admitted; "I know he was the best wrestler, and that he and my father were generally neck and neck in all the running races. He was a better high kick, because his legs were longer, don't you know, but the Pater was ahead in boxing."

Margaret was bewildered. Was this scholarship? Was this the record that brilliant boys left behind them? She gave a little sigh; the mention of long legs brought her back to Basil again. Dear Basil! he had only one pair of knickerbockers left that was fit to be seen. She ought to be mending the

corduroys this moment, in case he should come home all in pieces, as he was apt to do.

"Have you any little brothers, Mr. Merryweather?" she asked, following the thread of her thought.

"One; Willy. That is, he's not so very little now, but he's a good bit younger than Phil and I; Phil is my twin. Willy — oh, I suppose he must be fourteen, or somewhere about there, to a field or two."

"Basil is twelve," said Margaret, thoughtfully. "And does he — or did he, two years ago, — I suppose a boy develops very quickly, — did he want to be climbing and jumping and running *all* the time?"

"Let me see!" said Gerald, gravely. "Why — yes, I should say so, Miss Montfort. Of course he stops now and then to eat; and then there's the time that he's asleep, you know; you have to take out that. But otherwise, — yes, I should say you had described Willy's existence pretty well."

"And climbing on roofs?" Margaret went on. "And tumbling into bogs, and turning somersaults? What *can* be the pleasure of

turning oneself wrong side up and getting the blood into one's head?"

Margaret stopped suddenly, and the colour rushed into her face; no need of somersaults in her case. For had not this young man been turning somersaults the first time she saw him? And turning them in the same senseless way, just for the joy of it, apparently? She glanced at him, and he was blushing too; but he met her look of distress with one so comic in its quizzical appeal, that she laughed in spite of herself.

"I love to turn somersaults!" he murmured. "'Twas the charm of my chirping childhood; it is now the solace of my age. Don't be severe, Miss Montfort. I turn them now, sometimes; I will not deceive you."

"Oh! oh, yes, I know!" said Margaret, timidly, but still laughing in spite of herself. "I — I saw you the other day, Mr. Merryweather. I thought — you seemed to be enjoying yourself very much."

"No! Did you, though?" cried Gerald. "I say! Where was it? I never meant to do it when people were round. I'm awfully sorry."

"Oh, no!" said Margaret, confused. "Why shouldn't you? It — it was by the edge of the bog. I had come round that way, and you were leaping with a pole about the bog, and I — stayed to watch you. I hope you don't mind;" this foolish girl was blushing again furiously, which was most unnecessary; "and — I thought you must be a foreigner; I don't know why. And — and then you came out, and turned a somersault, and — I wondered why, that was all. You see, I never had a brother, and I have never known any boys in all my life till now. I don't mean that you are a boy, of course!"

"Oh, but I *am!*" cried Gerald. "What else am I but a boy? I wish they could hear you at home. Why, I'm just Jerry, you know, and — and I've always been that kind of boy, I'm afraid; just like Willy, only a good deal worse. And now — well, I've been through college, and now I'm in the School of Mines, and I'm twenty-one, and all that, but I can't seem to make myself feel any older, don't you know. I don't know what's going to become of me. Hilda says I won't grow up till I fall

—oh! you don't know Hilda, do you, Miss Montfort?"

"Hilda?" repeated Margaret. "I only know Hilda in the 'Marble Faun.'"

"Hildegarde Merryweather; Hildegarde Grahame she used to be. I thought you might possibly have — well, she's my aunt according to the flesh. I wish you did know her!"

"Your aunt? Is she — is she about Uncle John's age? I know so few people, you see. I have lived a very quiet life."

"Oh, no! She — well, I suppose she's a little older than you, but not very much. She married Roger, don't you know. He's my half-uncle all right, but he's ever so many years younger than the Pater, nearer our age, you might almost say; and Hildegarde and the girls, my sisters, — I say! I wish you knew them all, Miss Montfort."

"I wish I did," said Margaret, simply. "There are no girls of my own age near here. Last year I had my cousins, and I miss them so much!"

"Of course you must!" said sympathetic

Gerald. "Girls are no end — I — I mean, I like them too, ever so much." He paused, and wished he knew the right thing to say. How pretty and sweet she was! Not like Hilda, of course (Hilda was this young man's ideal of what a girl should be), but with a little quiet way of her own that was very nice. She must have no end of a time of it with these youngsters! He spoke his thought aloud. They were nearing Fernley, and he must leave her soon. "You must be having some difficulty with those youngsters, Miss Montfort. If I could help you any time, I wish you'd let me know. There have always been such a lot of us at home, I'm used to most kinds of children, you see; and I should be ever so glad — "

"Oh, thank you!" said Margaret, gratefully. "I am sure you are very kind; and if you would advise me sometimes — now that Uncle John is away — I should be most grateful. But — I ought to be able to manage them myself, it seems to me, without help. If I can only make them love me!" She looked straight at Gerald, and her dark gray

"'WON'T YOU COME IN?'"

eyes were very wistful in their unconscious appeal.

"I'd like to see 'em not!" said the young man, straightway. "Little beggars! They couldn't help themselves!" He was about to add that he would thrash them handsomely if they did not love her, but pulled himself together, and blushed to his ears, and was only comforted by seeing out of the tail of his eye that the girl was wholly unconscious of his blushes. After all, there was some sense in freckles and sunburn.

But here they were now at the gates of Fernley. "Won't you come in?" said Margaret. But Gerald, becoming once more conscious of his working-clothes, which he had entirely forgotten, excused himself. If he might come some evening soon? Yes, he might, and should. He lingered still a moment, and Margaret, after a moment's shyness, held out her hand frankly. "I am so glad to know you!" she said, simply. "Uncle John — Mr. Montfort said I was to be good to you, and I will try."

"I'm sure you couldn't be anything else!"

said Gerald, with fervour. "Thanks, awfully, Miss Montfort. Good-bye!" Lifting his cap, the young man turned away, feeling homesick, and yet cheerful. Passing round the corner of the house, and finding himself well out of sight of the young girl, he relieved his feelings by turning a handspring; and on coming to his feet again, encountered the awful gaze of two greenish eyes, bent upon him from an upper window of the house.

"Now I've done it!" said the youth, brushing himself, and assuming all the dignity of which he was master. "Wonder who that is? Housekeeper, perhaps? Quite the Gorgon, whoever it is. Wish I didn't turn over so easily."

Margaret went into the house singing, with a lighter heart than she had felt since Uncle John's letter came. Perhaps she had made a friend; at any rate, a pleasant acquaintance. What a frank, nice, gentlemanly—boy! "For he is a boy, just as he says!" she acknowledged to herself. And what kind, honest eyes he had; and how thoughtful, to offer to help her with the children!

Her pleasant meditations were harshly interrupted. Miss Sophronia came down-stairs, with her brown and yellow shawl drawn over her shoulders; this, Margaret had learned, was a bad sign.

"Margaret, who was that young man? I saw you! There is no use in attempting to conceal anything from me, my dear. I saw you talking with a young man at the gate."

"Why should I conceal it?" asked Margaret, wondering. "It was Mr. Merryweather, Cousin Sophronia. He was a schoolmate of Uncle John's, — I mean his father was."

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried the lady, sharply. "Don't tell me anything of the kind, miss. He was a common workman, a day-labourer. I tell you I saw him! Do you suppose I have no eyes in my head? I shall consider it my duty to tell your uncle as soon as he comes home. I am surprised at you, Margaret. I thought at least you were discreet. William's daughters would no more think of talking with such a person — but that comes of leaving a young person alone

here with servants. My dear, I shall make it a point henceforward—"

She stopped; for the gentle Margaret turned upon her with eyes of fire. "Cousin Sophronia, I cannot listen to this; I will not listen! I am a gentlewoman, and must be spoken to as a gentlewoman. I am eighteen years old, and am accountable to no one except Uncle John for my behaviour. Let me pass, please! I want to go to my room."

The girl swept by, her head high, her cheeks burning with righteous wrath. Miss Sophronia gazed after her speechless; it was as if a dove had ruffled its wings and flown in her face. "Ungrateful girl!" said the lady to herself. "I never meet with anything but ingratitude wherever I go. She is as bad as those girls of William's, for all her soft looks. The human heart is very, very depraved. But I shall do my duty, in spite of everything."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SECOND CONQUEST.

THE boys came home late for tea that night, bubbling over with joy. Basil declared that they did not want any supper. "Mrs. Peyton gave us some of her supper. I say, Cousin Margaret, isn't she bully?"

"Basil, if you *could* find another adjective now and then! I cannot imagine anything less appropriate to Mrs. Peyton than — the one you used."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter! She *is* bully! She had broiled chicken, a whole one, and she just took a little piece off the breast for herself, and then she told Mert and me each to take a leg and run. And we did! And Mert sat down in the china bath-tub with his, and smashed it, — cracked it, at least, — and she said she didn't care."

"And the table-drawer was full of choco-

late peppermints," chimed in Merton, "and we ate so many, I don't feel very well now, I think, p'r'aps."

"And she told us lots of things!" cried Basil again; he looked towards Miss Sophronia, with sparkling eyes. "She told us about when she was a little girl, and used to stay here, when Uncle John's puppa and mumma were alive. I say! And you were here, too, she said, Cousin Sophronia. And she said — lots of things!" The boy stopped suddenly, and gave his brother a look of intelligence.

"Ho!" said Merton, "I know what you mean, — you mean about the ghost, that scared — I say! You stop pinching, will you? I'll punch your — "

"Merton!" said Margaret, warningly.

"Well, he was pinching me!" whined Merton. "And it did scare you, didn't it, Cousin Sophronia?"

Miss Sophronia looked disturbed. "Merton, you should speak when you are spoken to!" she said, severely. "I am surprised that Mrs. Peyton should have told you such

things. There certainly were some very strange occurrences at Fernley, Margaret, when I was a young girl. They never were explained to my satisfaction; indeed, I never heard of their being explained at all. Little boys, if you do not want any supper, you may as well run away. I do not approve of their going to see Emily Peyton, Margaret. I shall make a point of their not doing so in future. She was always malicious."

She seemed much fluttered, and Margaret, wondering, hastened to change the subject. "I wonder where Susan D. can be. I have not seen the child since I came in, and she did not answer when I called her. Elizabeth, do you —"

"Pardon me, Margaret, my love!" Miss Sophronia interposed. "Susan D. is in bed; I sent her to bed an hour ago."

"Oh, Cousin Sophronia! Without her supper? What had she done?"

"She was disobedient, my dear, — disobedient and impertinent. I have no doubt that this will have an excellent effect upon

the child. Basil, what do you want? I told you to go away."

"Cousin Margaret, could I speak to you a moment, please?" asked the boy.

"I will come to you, Basil," said Margaret, quickly. "Will you excuse me, Cousin Sophronia, please? I have quite finished. Now, Basil, what is it?"

She led the boy carefully out of earshot, for thunder and lightning were in his face, and she foresaw an outburst.

"Susan D. is in bed!" cried Basil. "She has had no supper at all; Elizabeth said so. That woman sent her. Cousin Margaret, I won't stand it. I — I'll set fire to her clothes! I'll shoot her! I'll — I'll kill her some way — "

Margaret laid her hand over the boy's mouth. "You will be silent!" she said. "Not a word, not a syllable, till you can speak like a civilised being. We will have no savages here."

Basil said no word, — he knew well enough when he must obey, — but he set his teeth, and clenched his fists; the veins on his temples swelled, his whole childish frame

shook with anger. Margaret had never seen any one, not even Rita, in such a passion as this. For a few moments, the two stood motionless, facing each other. Then Margaret took the boy's hand in hers, and led him out into the garden. Still holding his hand, she paced up and down the green walk in silence, Basil following obediently. The evening was falling soft and dusk; the last bird was chirping sleepily; the air was full of the scent of flowers. Behind the dark trees, where the sun had gone down, the sky still glowed with soft, yellow light. "See!" said Margaret, presently. "There is the first star. Let us wish! Oh, Basil dear, let us wish — and pray — for a good thing, for strength to overcome — ourselves."

The boy's hand pressed hers convulsively, but he did not speak at first. Presently he said, almost in a whisper, "She is so little, — and so thin! I told Mother I would take care of her. But — I said — I would try not to let go of myself, too."

Very tenderly Margaret drew the child

down beside her, on a rustic bench that stood under one of the great tulip-trees. In the quiet darkness, she felt his heart open to her even more than it had done yet. In the hour that followed, she learned the story of a wild, faithful nature, full of mischief, full of love. The passionate love for his mother, whom he remembered well; the faithful, scowling devotion to the little sister, whom no one should scold but himself, and whom he shook, and bullied, and protected with a sole eye to her good; all this, and much more, Margaret learned. The two sat hand in hand, and took counsel together. "Oh, it is so good to have some one to talk to," cried Basil.

"Isn't it, dear?" said Margaret. "Now you know how I feel with Uncle John away; and — oh, Basil, before I had Uncle John, — when my father died, — oh, my dear! But you are going to be my brother now, Basil, — my dear, dear little brother, aren't you? And you will tell me how to make Susan D. love me. I think you do love me a little already, don't you, Basil?"

For all answer, Basil threw his arms round her, and gave her such a hug as made her gasp for breath.

"Dear boy," cried Margaret, "don't — kill me! Oh, Basil! I tried to hug Susan D. the other day, and I might as well have hugged the door! She won't even let me kiss her good night; that is, she lets me, but there is no response. Why doesn't she like me, do you think?"

"She does!" said Basil. "Or she will, soon as she can get out of herself. Don't you know what I mean, Cousin Margaret? It's as if she had a dumb spirit, like that fellow in the Bible, don't you know? Nobody but me understands; but you will, just once you get inside."

"Ah, but how shall I ever get inside?" said Margaret.

Basil nodded confidently. "You will!" he said. "I know you will, some time. Oh, Cousin Margaret, mayn't I take her something to eat? She's always hungry, Susan D. is, and I know she won't sleep a mite if she doesn't have anything. I — no, I won't let

go again, but it *is* the meanest, hatefullest thing that ever was done in the world! Now isn't it, Cousin Margaret? Don't you think so yourself?"

Sorely puzzled as to the exact path of duty, Margaret tried to explain to the boy how ideas of discipline had changed since Cousin Sophronia was a young girl; how, probably, she had herself been brought up with rigid severity, and, never having married, had kept all the old cast-iron ideas which were now superseded by wider and better knowledge and sympathy. As to this particular point, what should she say? Her whole kind nature revolted against the thought of the hungry child, alone, waking, perhaps weeping, with no one to comfort her; yet how could she, Margaret, possibly interfere with the doings of one old enough to be her mother?

Pondering in anxious perplexity, she chanced to raise her eyes to the house. It was brightly lighted, and, as it happened, the curtains had not been drawn. "Look!" said Margaret, pressing the boy's hand in hers. "Basil, look!"

One long, narrow window looked directly upon the back stairs, which led from the servants' hall to the upper floor. Up these stairs, past the window, a figure was now seen to pass, swiftly and stealthily; a portly figure, carrying something that looked like a heaped up plate; the figure of Frances the cook. It passed, and in a moment more they saw light, as of an opening door, flash into the dark window of the corner room where the little girl slept.

"Do you know, Basil," said Margaret, "I wouldn't worry any more about Susan D.'s being hungry. There is one person in Fernley whom no one, not even Uncle John, can manage; that is Frances."

An hour or so later, Margaret was coming down from the nursery. Merton had announced, as bedtime drew near, that he "felt a pain;" and Margaret had no difficulty in tracing it to Mrs. Peyton's careless indulgence. She stole down quietly to the cheerful back room where Frances and Elizabeth sat with their sewing, and begged for some simple remedy. Frances rose with alacrity. "Check-

erberry cordial is what you want, Miss Margaret," she said. "I've made it for thirty year, and I hope I know its merits. No wonder the child is sick. If some had their way, everybody in this house 'ud be sick to starvation."

"I am afraid it was the other thing in this case, Frances," said Margaret, meekly. "I'm afraid Master Merton ate too many rich things at Mrs. Peyton's." Now in general, Frances could not abide patiently the mention of Mrs. Peyton; but this time she declared she was glad the child had had enough to eat for once. "'Twill do him no harm!" she said, stoutly. "Give him ten drops of this, Miss Margaret, in a wine-glass of hot water, — wait a minute, dear, and I'll mix it myself, — and he'll turn over and go to sleep like a lamb. Treating children as if they was one half starch and t'other half sticks! Don't tell me!"

Knowing that none of this wrath was directed against herself, Margaret wisely held her tongue, and departed with her glass, leaving Frances still muttering, and Elizabeth with lips pursed up in judicious silence. And

Merton took it and felt better, and was glad enough to be petted a little, and finally to be tucked up with the hot water-bottle for a comforter.

As has been said, Margaret was coming down-stairs after this mission was fulfilled, when she met Miss Sophronia coming up. "All quiet up-stairs, my dear?" said the lady. "I am going to bed myself, Margaret, for I feel a little rheumatic, or I should rather say neuralgic, perhaps. These things are very obscure; the doctor says my case is a very remarkable one; he has never seen another like it. Yes, and now I am going to make sure that this child is all right, and that she does not actually need anything. Duty, Margaret, is a thing I can never neglect."

Margaret followed her cousin into the room, feeling rather self-reproachful. Perhaps she had been unjust in her judgment. Cousin Sophronia was of course doing the best, or what she thought the best, for this poor wild little girl.

Miss Sophronia advanced towards the bed, holding up her candle. Margaret, looking over her shoulder, saw the child lying fast

asleep, her hand under her cheek. Her face was flushed, and her fair hair lay in a tangle on the pillow. Margaret had never seen her look so nearly pretty. There were traces of tears on her face, too, and she sobbed a little, softly, in her sleep.

"Poor little thing!" whispered Margaret; but Miss Sophronia was not looking at Susan D. now. With stiff, outstretched finger she pointed to the floor. "Look at that!" she said, in a penetrating whisper. Indeed, the child had dropped her clothes on the floor all at once, and they lay in an untidy heap, shocking to Margaret's eyes, which loved to see things neatly laid. She shook her head and was about to murmur some extenuation of the offence, when — Miss Sophronia set down the candle on the stand; then, with a quick, decided motion, she pulled the sleeping child out of bed. "Susan D.," she said, "pick up your clothes at once. Never let me find them in this condition again. Shocking!"

The child stood helpless, bewildered, blinking, half awake, at the light, not in the least understanding what was said to her. Miss

Sophronia took her by the shoulder, not unkindly, and repeated her command. "Pick them up at once, my dear! Let this be a lesson to you, never to leave your clothes on the floor again." Still only half comprehending, the child stooped, stumbling as she did so, and picking up the clothes, laid them on the chair as she was directed.

"There!" said Miss Sophronia, in high satisfaction. "Now, my dearest Margaret, you will see that this child will never neglect her clothes again. A lesson promptly administered, on the spot, is worth all the preaching in the world. Get into bed again, Susan D., and go to sleep like a good child. Some day you will be very grateful to your Cousin Sophronia for teaching you these things."

She turned away with the candle. Margaret, standing in the shadow, saw the child still standing in the middle of the room, a forlorn, shivering little figure, silent; the most piteous sight those tender eyes had ever looked upon. Softly the girl closed the door. "Margaret," she heard her cousin say. "Oh, she is gone down-stairs!" and the steps went away

along the entry. But Margaret groped her way to where Susan D. stood; the next moment she had the child in her arms, and was pressing her close, close. A rocking-chair was by; she had seen it, and knew where to lay her hand to draw it forward. She sank down in it, and rocked to and fro, murmuring inarticulate words of comfort. The night was warm, but still the child shivered; Margaret, groping again, found a shawl, and wrapped it round her. There was no more holding off, no more resistance; the little creature clung around Margaret's neck with a desperate hold, as if she dared not let her go for an instant. Her breast heaved once or twice, silently; then she burst into a passion of tears, and sobbed on her cousin's heart. "I love you!" cried the child. "You are good, and I love you! Don't — don't leave me alone, please don't!"

Margaret held her close in her warm, loving arms. "My lamb!" she said. "My little girl! Indeed I will not leave you. Quiet now, dearie; quiet and don't cry! Oh, Susan D., I have no mother, either, dear; let us love

each other a great, great deal!" and Susan D. sobbed, and curled closer yet, as if she would wind herself into the very heart that beat so kindly and so tenderly.

So they sat, till the sobs died away into soft, broken breathings. Margaret began to sing, and crooned one after another the old songs that Katy used to sing to her when she was rocked just so on that broad, faithful Irish breast. Susan D. lifted her head a little towards her ear. "What is it?" said Margaret, bending down.

"I — I do like singing!" whispered the child.

Margaret nodded, and sang on. By and by the almost frantic clasp of the small arms loosened; the head sank back gently on her arm; the child was asleep. Margaret rose to lay her down, but instantly she started up again, affrighted, and cried out, and begged not to be left alone. What was to be done? Margaret hesitated; then she bade the child hold fast, and slowly, carefully she made her way down the stairs and through the passage to her own room, and did not pause till the

little child was lying safe, happy, and wondering, in the white bed, in the wonderful White Room.

"Crowd me ?" said Cousin Margaret. "Not a bit of it ! There is plenty of room, and in the morning we will have a most lovely cuddle, and tell stories. But now go to sleep this very minute, Susan D., while I do my hair. Good night, little sister ! "

"Good night !" said Susan D. "I love you ! Good night ! "

CHAPTER XII.

THE VOICE OF FERNLEY.

From that night, Susan D. was Margaret's friend and true lover.

She followed her round in the hope of being able to do some little service of love. She brought her flowers, and hunted the fields for the largest and finest berries for her. At any hour of the day, Margaret might feel a little hot hand slide into hers and deposit a handful of warm, moist raspberries or blueberries. Sometimes this bred trouble, as when Merton waylaid his sister, and wrested the hard-won treasures from her for his own refreshment; with the result of shrieks and scuffling, and a final thrashing from his elder brother; or, as when Cousin Sophronia detected the child sidling along with closed palm, and demanded to see what she had. Susan D. resisted stoutly, till at

length, yielding to superior strength, she threw the berries on the floor, and trampled them into the carpet. There was a good deal of this kind of thing; but still the change was a blessed one, and Margaret, when she met the beaming look of love in the child's face, and remembered the suspicious scowl that had greeted her only so few days ago, was most thankful, and felt it to be worth any amount of trouble, even to taking the spots out of the carpet, which was a hard thing to do.

"I told you!" said Basil, smiling superior. "I told you, once you got inside, you'd find the kid not at all so bad. I say, Cousin Margaret, you're not a fraidcat, are you?"

"A what, Basil?"

"A fraidcat! Don't you know what a fraidcat is, Cousin Margaret? Seems to me you didn't learn many modern expressions when you were a little girl, did you?"

"Really, Basil, I think I learned all that were necessary," said Margaret, laughing. "I did not learn slang, certainly, nor boy-jargon, and I don't care to take lessons,

thank you. Don't you think good, plain English is good enough?"

"Oh, well, it sounds all right from you, 'cause you are you, and you wouldn't match yourself if you didn't talk that way, I suppose. But it would sound silly for a boy to go on so, don't you see?"

"I am afraid I don't see very well, Basil, but no matter. The things I am afraid of are spiders and caterpillars and cows! Is that what you wanted to know?"

"N— not exactly!" said the boy; "but no matter, Cousin Margaret. You haven't got a ball of twine, have you? Oh, yes, please! Thank you, that is just exactly what I wanted. You always know where things are, don't you? That's bully!"

The children had been very good for the last few days; singularly good, Margaret thought, as she sat on the verandah in the pleasant twilight, reviewing the day's doings, and wondering what happy day would bring Uncle John back to her. Certainly, he would find a good deal of improvement. Merton had not run away since his experience in the

bog; Susan D. was won, and Basil grew more and more helpful and considerate. More than that, the children, all three of them, seemed to have quieted down of their own accord. At this hour, they were generally shouting and screaming, racing over the grass, or tumbling headlong from the trees, keeping Margaret in a constant state of terror, and Cousin Sophronia in one of peevish irritation and alarm. But now they had gone of their own will to the summer-house, saying that they were going to tell stories, and see how quiet they could be. They were quiet, indeed, for she could not even hear their voices. Cousin Sophronia, coming out with an inquiry, became instantly suspicious, and declared she must go and see what they were about; but Margaret begged her to wait a little. "They can do no harm in the summer-house!" she said. "And — Uncle John thought we would better let them alone a good deal, Cousin Sophronia."

"My love," said the lady, seating herself, and folding her hands for a good talk, "your Uncle John is a babe, simply a babe in these

matters. Even if he knew anything about children, — which he does not, — it would be my duty, my positive duty, to shield him from all anxieties of this kind. Why else did I come here, my love, except for this very thing?"

"Did you, then, know that Cousin Anthony wished to send the children?" asked Margaret, perhaps not without a spice of gentle malice.

"Ahem! No, not precisely, my love! But — but it was my firm resolve to protect dearest John from every species of annoyance. Every species, my dear! John Montfort — good gracious! What is that?" She started to her feet, and Margaret followed her example. A sound seemed to pass them in the air; a strange sound, something between a sigh and a moan. It swelled for a moment, then died away among the trees beyond the verandah. Miss Sophronia clutched Margaret's arm. "You — you made that noise?" she whispered. "Say it was you, Margaret!"

"Indeed, it was not I, Cousin Sophronia!" said Margaret. "It must have been a

sudden gust of wind. It is gone now; it must surely have been the wind. Shall I bring you a wrap? Do you feel chilly?"

Miss Sophronia still held her arm. "No, no! Don't go!" she said. "I — I feel rather nervous to-night, I think. Nerves! Yes, no one knows what I suffer. If you had any idea what my nights are — You may be right, my dear, about the wind. It is a misfortune, I always say, to have such exquisite sensibility. The expression is not my own, my love, it is Doctor Soper's. Shall we go into the house, and light the lamps? So much more cheerful, I always think, than this dreary twilight."

Margaret hesitated a moment. The evening was very warm, and once in the house, her cousin would be sure to shut all the windows and draw the curtains. Still, she must not be selfish —

"If I join you in a few minutes, Cousin Sophronia?" she said. "The children — I suppose it is time for them to come in. I will just go down to the summer-house and see — "

The sentence remained unfinished; for at that moment, almost close beside them, arose

the strange moaning sound once more. This time Miss Sophronia shrieked aloud. "Come!" she cried, dragging Margaret towards the house. "Come in this moment! It is the Voice! The Voice of Fernley. I will not stay here; I will not go in alone. Come with me, Margaret!"

She was trembling from head to foot, and even Margaret, who was not timid about such matters, felt slightly disturbed. Was this some trick of the children? She must go and hunt them up, naughty little things. Ah! What was that, moving in the dusk? It was almost entirely dark now, but something was certainly coming up the gravel walk, something that glimmered white against the black box-hedges. Miss Sophronia uttered another piercing shriek, and would have fled, but Margaret detained her. "Who is that?" said the girl. "Basil, is that you? Where are the other children?"

The white figure advanced; it was tall and slender, and seemed to have no head. Miss Sophronia moaned, and cowered down at Margaret's side.

"I beg pardon!" said a deep, cheerful voice. "I hope nothing is wrong. It is only I, Miss Montfort, — Gerald Merryweather."

Only a tall youth in white flannels; yet, at that moment, no one, save Uncle John himself, could have been more welcome, Margaret thought. "Oh, Mr. Merryweather," she said, "I am so glad to see you! No, nothing is wrong, I hope; that is — won't you come up on the verandah? My cousin — Cousin Sophronia, let me present Mr. Merryweather."

Mr. Merryweather advanced, bowing politely to the darkness; when, to his amazement, the person to whom he was to pay his respects sprang forward, and clutched him violently.

"You — you — you abominable young man!" cried Miss Sophronia, shrilly. "You made that noise; you know you made it, to annoy me! Don't tell me you did not! Get away from here this instant, you — you — impostor!"

Margaret was struck dumb for an instant. and before she could speak, Gerald Merryweather was replying, quietly, as if he had been throttled every day of his life:

"If choking is your object, madam, you can do it better by pulling the other way, I would suggest. By pulling in this direction, you see, you only injure the textile fabric, and leave the *corpus delicti* comparatively unharmed."

He stood perfectly still; Miss Sophronia still clutched and shook him, muttering inarticulately; but now Margaret seized and dragged her off by main force. "Cousin Sophronia!" she cried. "How can you — what can you be thinking of? This is Mr. Merryweather, I tell you, the son of Uncle John's old schoolmate. Uncle John asked him to call. I am sure you are not well, or have made some singular mistake."

"I don't believe a word of it!" said Miss Sophronia. "Not one single word! What was he making that noise for, I should like to know?"

Mr. Merryweather answered with a calm which he was far from feeling. His pet necktie was probably ruined, his collar crumpled, very likely his coat torn. He had taken pains with his toilet, and now he had been set upon and harried, by some one he had never seen,

but whom he felt sure to be the Gorgon who had glared at him out the window several days before. This was a horrid old lady; he saw no reason why he should be attacked in the night by horrid old ladies, when he was behaving beautifully.

"I am sorry!" he said, rather stiffly. "I was not conscious of speaking loud. Miss Montfort asked who it was, and I told her. If I have offended *her*, I am ready to apologise — and withdraw."

This sounded theatrical, it occurred to him; but then, the whole scene was fit for the variety stage. Poor Margaret felt a moment of despair. What should she do?

"Mr. Merryweather," she said, aloud, "Miss Montfort has been much startled. Just before you came, we heard a noise; rather a strange noise, which we could not account for. I think her nerves are somewhat shaken. She will be better in a moment. And — and I was just going to the summer-house, to call the children. Would you come with me, I wonder?"

Miss Sophronia clamoured that she could not be left alone, but for once Margaret was deaf

to her appeals. She was too angry; her guest —that is, her uncle's guest—to be set upon and shaken, as if he were a naughty child caught stealing apples,—it was too shameful! He would think they were all out of their senses.

"Oh, I am so sorry! So sorry!" she found herself saying aloud. "Mr. Merryweather, I am so mortified, so ashamed! What can I say to you?"

"Say!" said Gerald, his stiffness gone in an instant. "Don't say anything, Miss Montfort. I—I don't mean that; I mean, there's nothing *to* say, don't you know? Why, it wasn't your fault! Who ever thought of its being your fault?"

"I ought to have recognised you sooner!" said Margaret. "It was pretty dark, and we had really been startled, and my cousin is very nervous. If you would *please* overlook it this time I should be so grateful!"

"Oh, I *say!*" cried the young man. "Miss Montfort, if you go on in this way, I shall go back and ask the old—and ask the lady to choke me some more. I—I *like* being

choked! I like anything; only don't go on so! Why, it isn't any matter in the world. Perhaps it relieved her feelings a bit; and it didn't do me any harm." He felt of his necktie, and settled his collar as well as he could, thankful for the friendly darkness. "Indeed, I am all right!" he assured her, earnestly. "Trivets aren't a circumstance to me, as far as rightness is concerned. Now if you'll forget all about it, Miss Montfort, please, I shall be as happy as the bounding roe, — or the circumflittergating cockchafer!" he added, as a large June-bug buzzed past him.

"You are very good!" murmured Margaret. "I am sure — but here is the summer-house. Children, are you here? Basil! Susan D.!"

No answer came. The frogs chirped peacefully, the brook at the foot of the garden sent up its soft, bubbling murmur; there was no other sound. It was very dark, for the trees were thick overhead. The fireflies flitted hither and thither, gleaming amid the thickets of honeysuckle and lilac; the young man's figure beside her glimmered faintly in the darkness, but there was no glimpse

of Susan D.'s white frock, or Basil's white head.

"Children!" cried Margaret again. "Don't play any tricks, dears! It is bedtime, and after, and you must come in. Susan, Cousin wants you, dear!"

Silence; not a rustle, not a whisper.

"I should suppose they had gone," said Gerald. "Or do you think they are playing hookey? Wait a minute, and I'll hunt around."

But search availed nothing; the children were not in the summer-house, nor near it. "They must have gone back to the house," said Margaret. "Thank you so much, Mr. Merryweather. I am sorry to have given you all this trouble for nothing."

"Oh, trouble!" said Gerald. "This isn't my idea of trouble, Miss Montfort. What a pretty place this is! Awfully — I mean, extremely pretty."

"It is pretty in the daytime. I should hardly think you could see anything now, it is so dark."

"Well, yes, it is dark; but I mean it seems

such a pleasant place to sit and rest in a little. Hadn't you better sit and rest a minute, Miss Montfort? The children are all right, you may be sure. Gone to bed, most likely, like good little kids. I — I often went to bed, when I was a kid."

Margaret could not help laughing; nevertheless, she turned decidedly towards the house. "I am afraid I cannot be sure of their having gone to bed," she said. "I think I must find them, Mr. Merryweather, but if you are tired, you shall rest on the verandah while I hunt."

Gerald did not want to rest on the verandah, particularly if his recent assailant were still there. He wanted to stay here in the garden. He liked the fireflies, and the frogs; the murmur of the brook, and the soft voice speaking out of the darkness. He thought this was a very nice girl; he wished she would not be so uneasy about those tiresome youngsters. However, as there seemed to be no help for it, he followed Margaret in silence up the gravel walk. She need not hurry so, he thought; it was very early, not half past

eight yet. He wanted to make his call; he couldn't dress up like this every night; and, besides, it was a question whether he could ever wear this shirt again by daylight.

Miss Sophronia was not on the verandah.

"Will you not come in?" asked Margaret at the door; but Gerald felt, rather than heard, the uneasiness in her voice, and decided, much against his inclination, that it would be better manners to say good night and take himself off.

"I think I must be going," he had begun already, when, from the open door behind them, burst a long, low, melancholy wail. The girl started violently. The young man bent his ear in swift attention. The voice — the cry — trembled on the air, swelled to a shriek; then died slowly away into a dreary whisper, and was gone.

Before either of the young people could speak, the library door was flung open, and a wild figure came flying out. Miss Sophronia threw herself once more upon Gerald, and clung to him with the energy of desperation. "My dear young man!" cried the distracted

lady. "Save me! Protect me! I knew your father! I was at school with your mother, — Miranda Cheerley. Save me, — hold me! Do not desert me! You are my only hope!"

It was past nine o'clock when Gerald Merryweather finally took his departure. The children had been discovered, — in bed, and apparently asleep. Three neatly folded piles of clothes showed at least that they had gone to bed in a proper and reasonable manner. Miss Sophronia Montfort had finally been quieted, by soothing words and promises, followed up by hot malted milk and checkerberry cordial, the latter grimly administered by Frances, and so strong that it made the poor lady sneeze. Margaret was to sleep with her; Gerald was to come the next morning to see how she was; meanwhile, Frances and Elizabeth, the latter badly frightened, the former entirely cool and self-possessed, were to sleep in the front chamber, and be at hand in case of any untoward event.

There was nothing further to be done save to shake hands warmly with Margaret, submit to an embrace from Miss Sophronia, and go.

Mr. Merryweather strode slowly down the garden path, looking back now and then at the house, where already the lights on the lower floor were being extinguished one by one.

"That's a very nice girl!" he murmured. "Hildegarde would approve of that girl, I know. But on the other hand, my son, that is a horrid old lady. I should like — Jerry, my blessed infant, I *should* like — to make that old lady run!" He turned for a final glance at the house; considered the advisability of turning a handspring; remembered his white flannels, and, with a bow to the corner window, was gone in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO DID IT?

"FRIGHTENED, was she?" said Mrs. Peyton. "How sad! Margaret, you are not looking at my bed-spread. This is the first day I have used it, and I put it on expressly for you. What is the use of my having pretty things, if no one will look at them?"

"Indeed, it is very beautiful!" said Margaret. "Everything you have is beautiful, Mrs. Peyton."

"It is Honiton!" said Mrs. Peyton. "It ought to be handsome. But you do not care, Margaret, it is perfectly easy to see that. You don't care about any of my things any more. I was simply a new toy to you in the beginning, and you liked to look at me because I was pretty. Now you have new toys, — Sophronia Montfort, I suppose, and a sweet plaything she is! and you pay no further attention to me. Deny it if you can!"

Margaret did not attempt to deny it; she was too absolutely truthful not to feel a certain grain of fact in the lady's accusation. Life was opening fuller and broader upon her every day; how could she think of lace bedspreads, with three children constantly in her mind, to think and plan and puzzle for? To say nothing of Uncle John and all the rest. And as to the "new toy" aspect, Margaret knew that she might well enough turn the accusation upon her lovely friend herself; but this she was too kind and too compassionate to do. Would not any one want toys, perhaps, if forced to spend one's life between four walls?

So she simply stroked the exquisite hand that lay like a piece of carved ivory on the splendid coverlet, and smiled, and waited for the next remark.

"I knew you would not deny it!" the lady said. "You couldn't, you see. Well, it doesn't matter! I shall be dead some day, I hope and trust. So Sophronia was frightened? Tell me more about it!"

"She was very much frightened!" said

Margaret. "Mrs. Peyton, I wanted to ask you — when the children came home yesterday, they said something about your having told them some story of old times here; of a ghost, or some such thing. I never heard of anything of the sort. Do you — do you remember what it was? I ought not to torment you!" she added, remorsefully; for Mrs. Peyton put her hand to her head, and her brow contracted slightly, as if with pain.

"Only my head, dear, it is rather troublesome to-day; I suppose I ought not to talk very much! Yes, there was a ghost, or something like one, in old times, when I was a child. I wasn't at Fernley at the time, but I heard about it; Sophronia was there, and I remember she was frightened into fits, just as you describe her last night."

"What — do you remember anything about it? It isn't that old story of Hugo Montfort, is it, the man who looks for papers?"

"Oh, no, nothing so interesting as that! I always longed to see Hugo. No, this is just a voice that comes and goes, wails about the rooms and the gardens. It is one of the

Montfort women, I believe, the one who cut up her wedding-gown and then went mad."

"Penelope?"

"That's it! Penelope Montfort. Once in a while they see her, but very rarely, I believe."

"Mrs. Peyton, you are making fun of me. Aunt Faith told me there was no ghost except that of Hugo Montfort; of course I don't mean that there is really that; but no ghost that people had ever fancied."

"Ah, well, my dear, all this was before Mrs. Cheriton came to Fernley! Before such a piece of perfection as she was, no wandering ghost would have ventured to appear. Now don't stiffen into stone, Margaret Montfort! I know she was a saint, but she never liked me, and I am not a saint, you see. I was always a sinner, and I expect to remain one. And certainly, there was a white figure seen about Fernley, at that time I was speaking of; and no one ever found out what it was; and if you want to know any more, you must ask John Montfort. There, now my head is confused, and I shall not have a straight thought again to-day!"

The lady turned her head fretfully on the pillow. Margaret, who knew her ways well, sat silent for some minutes, and then began to sing softly:

O sweetest lady ever seen,
(With a heigh ho! and a lily gay,)
Give consent to be my queen,
(As the primrose spreads so sweetly.)

Before the long ballad was ended, the line between Mrs. Peyton's eyebrows was gone, and her beautiful face wore a look of contentment that was not common to it.

"Go away now!" the lady murmured. "You have straightened me out again. Be thankful for that little silver voice of yours, child! You can do more good with it in the world than you know. I really think you are one of the few good persons who are not odious. Go now! Good-bye!"

Margaret went away, thinking, as she had often thought before, how like her Cousin Rita this fair lady was. "Only Rita has a great, great deal more heart!" she said to herself. "Rita only laughs at people when she is in

one of her bad moods. Dear Rita! I wonder where she is to-day. And Peggy is driving the mowing machine, she writes; mowing hundreds of acres, and riding bareback, and having a glorious time."

A letter had come the day before from Peggy Montfort, telling of all her delightful doings on the farm, and begging that her darling Margaret would come out and spend the rest of the summer with her. "Darling Margaret, do, do, *do* come! Nobody can possibly want you as much as I do; nobody can begin to think of wanting you one hundredth part as much as your own Peggy."

Margaret had laughed over the letter, and kissed it, and perhaps there was a tear in her eye when she put it away to answer. It was good, good to be loved. And Peggy did love her, and so she hoped — she knew — did Uncle John; and now the children were hers, two of them, at least; hers to have and to hold, so far as love went. Go away and leave them now, when they needed her every hour? "No, Peggy dear, not even to see your sweet, round, honest face again."

Coming back to the house she found Gerald Merryweather on the verandah. He was in his working clothes again, but they were fresh and spotless, and he was a pleasant object to look upon. He explained that he had called to inquire for the ladies' health, and to express his hope that they had suffered no further annoyance the night before. He was on his way to the bog, and just thought he would ask if there was anything he could do.

"Thank you!" said Margaret, gratefully. "You are very good, Mr. Merryweather. No; nothing more happened; and my poor cousin got some sleep after awhile. But I still cannot imagine what the noise was, can you?"

"So many noises at night, don't you know?" said Gerald. "Especially round an old house like this. You were not personally alarmed, were you, Miss Montfort?" I think you may be pretty sure that there was nothing supernatural about it. Oh, I don't mean anything in particular, of course; but — well, I never saw a ghost, and I don't believe in 'em. Do you?"

"Certainly not. I didn't suppose any one believed in them nowadays. But, — do you know, I really am almost afraid my Cousin Sophronia does. She will not listen to any explanation I can suggest. I really — oh, here she is, Mr. Merryweather!"

Miss Sophronia greeted Gerald with effusion. "I heard your voice, my dear young man," she said, "and I came down to beg that you would take tea with us this evening — with my niece — she is quite the same as my own niece; I make no difference, dearest Margaret, I assure you, — with my niece and me. If — if there should be any more unpleasant occurrences, it would be a comfort to have a man, however young, on the premises. Willis sleeps in the barn, and he is deaf, and would be of little use. He couldn't even be of the smallest use, if we should be murdered in our beds."

"Oh, but we are not going to be murdered, Cousin Sophronia," said Margaret, lightly. "We are going to be very courageous, and just let that noise understand that we care nothing whatever about it."

"Margaret, my love, you are trivial," responded Miss Sophronia, peevishly. "I wish you would pay attention when I speak. I ask Mr. Merryweather to take tea with us, and you talk about noises. Very singular, I am sure."

"Oh, but of course it would be very pleasant, indeed, to have Mr. Merryweather take tea with us!" cried Margaret, in some confusion. "I hope you will come, Mr. Merryweather."

It appeared that nothing in the habitable universe would give Mr. Merryweather greater pleasure. At half-past six? He would not fail to be on hand; and if there should be noises again, why — let those who made them look to themselves. And, with this, the young man took his leave.

The children were very troublesome that day. Margaret could not seem to lay her hand on any one of them. If she called Basil, he was "in the barn, Cousin Margaret, helping Willis with the hay. Of course I'll come, if you want me, but Willis seems to need me a good deal, if you don't mind."

When it was time for Susan D.'s sewing, the child came most obediently and affectionately; but her thimble was nowhere to be found, and she had mislaid her spool, and, finally, when everything was found, she had not sat still ten minutes, when she was "*so* thirsty; and must go and get a glass of water, please, Cousin Margaret!"

"Susan," said Margaret, "I want to talk to you, and I cannot seem to get a chance for a word. Sit still now, like a good little girl, and tell me —"

"Yes, Cousin Margaret, I couldn't find my thimble first, you see; and then there wasn't any spool, and I left it in my basket yesterday, I'm sure I did, but Merton *will* take it to teach the kitten tricks with, and then it gets all dirty. Don't you know how horrid a spool is when a kitten has been playing with it? You have to wind off yards and yards, and then the rest is sort of fruzzly, and keeps making knots."

"Yes, I know. Susan D., what were you doing last evening?" said Margaret.

"Last evening?" repeated the child. "We

were in the summer-house, Cousin Margaret. We were playing Scottish Chiefs, don't you know? Merton had to play Lord Soulis, 'cause he drew the short straw; but he got cross, and wouldn't play good a bit."

"Wouldn't play *well*, or *nicely*," corrected Margaret. "But after that, Susan dear?"

"That took a long time," said the child. It seemed, when she was alone with Margaret, that she could not talk enough; the little pent-up nature was finding most delightful relief and pleasure in unfolding before the sympathy that was always warm, always ready.

"You see, when it came to carrying me off (I was Helen Mar, after I'd been Marion and was dead), Merton was just horrid. He said he wouldn't carry me off; he said he wouldn't have me for a gift, and called me Scratch-face, and all kinds of names. And of course Lord Soulis wouldn't have talked that way; so Wallace (of course Basil *had* to be Wallace when he drew the long straw, and he never cheats, though Merton does, whenever he gets a chance)—well, and *so*, Wallace told him,

if he didn't carry me off in two shakes of a cat's tail — "

"Susan D.!"

"Well, that's what he *said*, Cousin Margaret. I'm telling you just as it happened, truly I am. If he didn't carry me off in two shakes of a cat's tail, he'd pitch him over the parapet, — you know there's a splendid parapet in the summer-house,— and so he wouldn't, and so he did; but Mert held on, and they both went over into the meadow. I guess Lord Soulis got the worst of it down there, for when they climbed up again he did carry me off, though he pinched me hard all the way, and made my arm all black and blue; I didn't say anything, because I was Helen Mar, but I gave it to him good — I mean well — this morning, and served him out. And then Wallace had to rescue me, of course, and that was *great*, and we all fell over the parapet again, and that was the way I tore the gathers out of my frock. So you see, Cousin Margaret!"

Susan D. paused for breath, and bent over her sewing with exemplary diligence. Mar-

garet took the child's chin in her hand, and raised her face towards her.

"Susan," she said, gently, "after you had that fine play — it must have been a great play, and I wish I had seen it — after that, what did you do?"

"We — we — went to bed!" said Susan D.

"Why did you go without coming to say good night? Answer me truly, dear child."

The two pairs of gray eyes looked straight into each other. A shadow of fear — a suggestion of the old look of distrust and suspicion — crept into the child's eyes for a moment; but before Margaret's kind, firm, loving gaze it vanished and was gone. A wave of colour swept over her face; her eyes wavered, gave one imploring glance, and fell.

"Aren't you going to tell me, Susan D.?" asked Margaret once more.

"N — no!" said Susan D., in a whisper scarcely audible.

"No? And why not, dear child?"

"I promised!" whispered Susan D.

"Susan D., do you know anything about that strange noise that frightened us so last night?"

But not another word would Susan D. say. She looked loving, imploring, deprecating; she threw her arms around Margaret's neck, and hid her face and clung to her; but no word could she be brought to say. At last Margaret, displeased and puzzled, felt constrained to tell the child rather sternly to fold her work and go away, and not come back to her till she could answer questions properly. Susan went obediently; at the door she hesitated, and Margaret heard a little sigh, which made her heart go out in sympathy toward the little creature. Instantly she rose, and, going to the child, put her arms round her affectionately.

"Darling, I think you are puzzled about something," she said, quickly. Susan D. nodded, and clung close to her cousin's side.

"I will not ask you anything more," said Margaret. "I am going to trust you, Susan D., not to do anything wrong. Remember, dear, that the two most important things in

the world are truth and kindness. Now kiss me, dear, and go."

Left alone, Margaret sat for some time, puzzling over what had happened, and wondering what would happen next. It was evident that the children were concerned in some way, or at least had some knowledge, of the mysterious sounds which had so alarmed Miss Sophronia. What ought she to do? How far must she try to force confession from them, if it were her duty to try; and how could she do it?

Thus pondering, she became aware of voices in the air; she sat near the open window, and the voices were from above her. The nursery window! She listened, bending nearer, and holding her breath.

"Well, if you back out now, Susan D., it will be mean!" Basil was saying. "What did you say to her?"

"I didn't say anything!" Susan D. answered, sullenly.

"Why didn't you tell her that we had a pain, and didn't want to bother her, 'cause she had company?" cried Merton, eagerly.

"I had that all fixed to tell her, only she never asked me."

"I wouldn't tell her a lie," said Susan D. "Basil, you wouldn't tell her a lie, either, you know you wouldn't, when she looks at you that way, straight at you, and you can't get your eyes away."

"Of course I wouldn't," said Basil. "And the reason she didn't ask you, Merton, was because she knew it wouldn't make much difference what you said. That's the trouble about you. But now, Susan, if you had only had a little dipplo-macy, you could have got through all right, as I did."

"I don't know what you mean by dipplomacy," retorted Susan.

"Ho, stupid!" sneered Merton.

"I don't believe you know what it means yourself!" cried Basil. "Come, tell now, if you are so wise. What does it mean? Ah, I knew you didn't know! You *are* a sneak, Mert! Well, I guess in the beginning, when Adam was making the words, you know, he must have wanted to hide from the serpent or something — perhaps a hairy mammoth, or a

megatherium, I shouldn't wonder, — so he said, 'Dip low,' and then 'Massy!' for a kind of exclamation, you see. And spelling gets changed a lot in the course of time; you can see that just from one class to another in the grammar school. Well, anyhow, it means a sort of getting round things, managing them, without telling lies, or truth either."

"You've got to tell one or the other," objected Susan D.

"No, you haven't, either! Now, how did I manage? I have just kept out of Cousin Margaret's way all day, so far, and I'm going to keep out the rest of it. I've been helping Willis ever since breakfast, and he says I really helped him a great deal, and I'll make a farmer yet; only I won't, 'cause I'm going into the navy. And now pretty soon I'm going in, in a tearing hurry, and ask her if I can take some lunch and go over to see Mr. Merryweather at the bog, 'cause he is going to give me a lesson in surveying. He *is;* he said he would, any time I came over. And so, you see — "

"That's all very well," interrupted Merton,

scornfully. "But when it comes night, what'll you do then, I should like to know?"

"Easy enough. I shall have a headache, and she won't ask me questions when I have a headache; she'll just sit and stroke my head, and put me to sleep."

"Ho! How'll you get your headache? Have to tell a lie then, I guess."

"No, sir, I won't! And if you say that again, I'll bunt you up against the wall. Easy enough to get a headache. I don't know whether I shall eat hot doughnuts, or just ram my head against the horse-chestnut-tree till it aches; but I'll get the headache, you may bet your boots —"

"Basil, she asked you not to say that, and you said you wouldn't."

"Well, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to. Pull out a hair, Susan D., and then I shall remember next time. Ouch! You pulled out two."

"I say, come on!" cried Merton. "We've got lots of things to see to. We have to —"

The voices were gone. Margaret sat still, sewing steadily, and working many thoughts into her seam.

It might have been half an hour after this that Basil burst into the room, breathless and beaming, his tow-colored hair standing on end. "Oh, Cousin Margaret, can I — I mean may I, go over to the bog? Mr. Merryweather said he would give me a lesson in surveying; and Frances is going to put me up some luncheon, and I'm in a *norful* hurry. May I go, please?"

"Yes, Basil; you may go after you have answered me one question."

"Yes, Cousin Margaret," said the diplomat. "I may miss Mr. Merryweather if I don't go pretty quick, but of course I will."

"Basil, did you make that strange noise last night?"

"No, Cousin Margaret!" cried the boy; the smile seemed to break from every corner of his face at once, and his eyes looked straight truth into hers. "I did not. Is that all? You said one question! Thank you ever and ever so much! Good-bye!" And he was gone.

"It is quite evident that I am not a dipplomat," said Margaret, with a laugh that ended in a sigh. "I wish Uncle John would come home!"

CHAPTER XIV.

BLACK SPIRITS AND WHITE.

The evening fell close and hot. Gerald Merryweather, taking his way to Fernley House, noticed the great white thunder-heads peering above the eastern horizon. "There'll be trouble by and by," he said.

> "I wonder, oh, I wonder,
> If they're afraid of thunder.

"Ever lapsing into immortal verse, my son. You are the Lost Pleiad of Literature, that's what you are; and a mighty neat phrase that is. Oh, my Philly, why aren't you here, to take notice of my coruscations? Full many a squib is born to blaze unseen, and waste its fizzing — Hello, you, sir! Stop a minute, will you?"

A small boy was scudding along the path before him. He turned his head, but on see-

ing Gerald he only doubled his rate of speed. Merton was a good runner for his size, but it was ill trying to race the Gambolling Greyhound, as Gerald had been called at school. Two or three quick steps, two or three long, lopping bounds, and Master Merton was caught, clutched by the collar, and held aloft, wriggling and protesting.

"You let me go!" whined Merton. "Oh, please Mr. Merryweather, don't stop me now. It's very important, indeed, it is."

"Just what I was thinking," said Gerald. "We'll go along together, my son. I wouldn't squirm, if I were you; destructive to the collar; believe one who has suffered. What! it is not so many years. Take courage, small cat, and strive no more!"

Merton, after one heroic wriggle, gave up the battle, and walked beside his captor in sullen silence.

"Come!" said Gerald. "Let us be merry, my son. As to that noise, now!"

"What noise?" asked Merton, peevishly.

"The roarer, my charmer. Why beat about the bush? You frightened the old — that is,

you alarmed both your cousins, with the joyful instrument known among the profane as a roarer. Tush! Why attempt concealment? Have I not roared, when time was? And a very pretty amusement, I could never deny; but I wouldn't try it again, that's all. You hear, young sir? I wouldn't try it again."

"I don't know what you mean —" Merton began; but at this Gerald lifted him gently from the ground by his shirt-collar, and, waving him about, intimated gently that it would not be good for his health to tell lies.

"Well, I didn't do it, anyhow!" Merton protested. "Honest, I did not."

"Honesty is not written in your expressive countenance, Master Merton Montfort," said Gerald. "However, it may be so. We shall see. Meantime, young fellow, and merely as between man and man, you understand, it would be money in your youthful pocket if you could acquire the habit of looking a person in the eyes, and not directing that cherubic gaze at the waistcoat buttons, or even the necktie, of your in-ter-loc-utor. Now, here we are at the house, and you may

go, my interesting popinjay. Bear in mind that my eye is upon you. Adieu! adieu! Rrrrrememberrrr me!!!"

Gerald put such dramatic fervour into this farewell that Merton was as heartily frightened as he could have desired, and scurried away without stopping to look behind.

"That's not such a very nice little boy, I believe," said Gerald. "T'other one is worth a cool dozen of Master Merton. Well, they won't do much mischief while I am to the fore. Though I should be loth to interfere with the end they probably have in view. I should like full well myself to make that—Ah, good evening, Miss Montfort!"

It was so hot after tea, that even Miss Sophronia made no suggestion of sitting in the house. They all assembled on the verandah, which faced south, so that generally here, if anywhere, a breath of evening coolness might be had. To-night, however, no such breath was to be felt. The thunderheads had crept up, up, half-way across the sky; their snowy white had changed to black-

ish blue; and now and again, there opened here or there what looked like a deep cavern, filled with lurid flame; and then would follow a long, rolling murmur, dying away into faint mutterings and losing itself among the tree-tops.

Miss Sophronia was very uneasy. At one moment she declared she must go into the house, she could not endure this; the next she vowed she would rather see the danger as it came, and she would never desert the others, never.

"Do you think there is danger, my dear young man?" she asked, for perhaps the tenth time.

"Why, no!" said Gerald. "No more than usual, Miss Montfort. These trees, you see, are a great protection. If the lightning strikes one of them, of course it will divert the fluid from the house. If you have no iron about your person —"

But here Miss Sophronia interrupted him. She begged to be excused for a moment, and went into the house. When she returned, her head was enveloped in what looked like

a "tidy" of purple wool, while her feet were shuffling along in a pair of blue knitted slippers.

"There!" she said, "I have removed every atom of metal, my dear young man, down to my hairpins, I assure you; and there were nails in my shoes, Margaret. My dear, I advise you to follow my example. So important, I always say, to obey the dictates of science. I shall always consider it a special providence that sent this dear young man to us at this trying time. Go at once, dearest Margaret, I implore you."

But Margaret refused to adopt any such measures of precaution. She was enjoying the slow oncoming of the storm; she had seldom seen anything more beautiful, she thought, and Gerald agreed with her. He was sitting near her, and had taken Merton on his knee, to that young gentleman's manifest discomposure. He wriggled now and then, and muttered some excuse for getting down, but Gerald blandly assured him each time that he was not inconveniencing him in the least, and begged him to make himself

comfortable, and entirely at home. Meantime, Margaret had called Basil and Susan D. to her side, and was holding a hand of each, calling upon them from time to time to see the wonderful beauty of the approaching storm. They responded readily enough, and were really interested and impressed. Once or twice, it is true, Basil stole a glance at his sister, and generally found her looking at him in a puzzled, inquiring fashion; then he would shake his head slightly, and give himself up once more to watching the sky.

It was a very extraordinary sky. The clouds, now deep purple, covered it almost from east to west; only low down in the west a band of angry orange still lingered, and added to the sinister beauty of the scene. The red caverns opened deeper and brighter, and now and again a long, zigzag flash of gold stood out for an instant against the black, and following it came crack upon crack of thunder, rolling and rumbling over their heads. But still the air hung close and heavy, still there was no breath of wind, no drop of rain.

Sitting thus, and for the moment silent, there came, in a pause of the thunder, a new sound; a sound that some of them, at least, knew well. Close at hand, rising apparently from the very wall at their side, came the long, eerie wail of the night before. Louder and louder it swelled, till it rang like a shriek in their ears, then suddenly it broke and shuddered itself away, till only the ghost of a sound crept from their ears, and was lost. Margaret and Gerald both sprang to their feet, the girl held the children's hands fast in hers, the lad clutched the boy in his arms till he whimpered and cried; their eyes met, full of inquiry, the same thought flashing from blue eyes and gray. Not the children? What, then? Before Gerald could speak, Miss Sophronia was clinging to him again, shrieking and crying; calling upon him to save her; but this time Gerald put her aside with little ceremony.

"If you'll take this boy!" he cried. "Hold him tight, please, and don't let him get off. I'm going — if I may?" he looked swift inquiry at Margaret.

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried the girl. "Do go! We are all right. Cousin Sophronia, you *must* let him go."

Dropping Merton into the affrighted lady's arms, the lithe, active youth was in the house in an instant, following the Voice of Fernley. There it came again, rising, rising, — the cry of a lost soul, the wail of a repentant spirit.

"A roarer, by all means!" said young Merryweather. "But where, and by whom?" He ran from side to side, laying his ear against the wall here, there, following the sound. Suddenly he stopped short, like a dog pointing. Here, in this thickness of the wall, was it? Then, there must be a recess, a something. What corresponded to this jog? Ha! that little low door, almost hidden by the great picture of the boar-hunt. Locked? No; only sticking, from not having been opened, perhaps, for years. It yielded. He rushed in, — the door closed behind him with a spring. He found himself in total darkness, — darkness filled with a hideous cry, that rang out sharp and piercing, — then fell into sudden silence.

"Is it you, Master Merton?" said a whisper. "I didn't wait; I thought maybe —"

Gerald stretched out his arm, and grasped a solid form. Instantly he was grasped in return by a pair of strong arms, — grasped and held with as powerful a grip as his own. A full minute passed, two creatures clutching each other in the pit-dark, listening to each other's breathing, counting each other's heart-beats. Then —

"Who are you?" asked Gerald, under his breath.

"None of your business!" was the reply, low, but prompt. "Who are you, if it comes to that?"

"Why, — why, you're a woman!"

"And you're a man, and that's worse. What are you doing here?"

"I am taking tea here. I'm a visitor. I have been here all the evening."

"And I've been here twenty years. I'm the cook."

The young man loosed his hold, and dropped on the floor. He rocked back and forth, in silent convulsions of laughter.

"The cook! Great Cæsar, the cook! Oh, dear me! Stop me, somebody. What — what did you do it for?" he gasped, between the paroxysms.

"Hush! Young Mr. Merryweather, is it? Do be quiet, sir! We're close by the verandah. Was — was she frightened, sir?"

"She? Who? One of 'em was."

"She — the old one. I wouldn't frighten Miss Margaret; but she has too much sense. Was the other one scared, sir?"

"Into fits, very near. You did it well, Mrs. Cook! I couldn't have done it better, — look here! I shall have to tell them, though. I came expressly to find out —"

Groping in the dark, Frances clutched his arm again, this time in a gentler grasp. "Don't you do it, sir!" she whispered. "Young gentleman, don't you do it! If you do, she'll stay here all her days. No one can't stand her, sir, and this were the only way. Hark! Save us! What's that?"

No glimmer of light could penetrate to the closet where they stood, in the thickness of the wall, but a tremendous peal of thunder

shook the house, and Miss Sophronia's voice could be heard calling frantically on Gerald to come back.

"I must go," said Gerald. "I — I won't give you away, Mrs. Cook. Shake!"

"You're a gentleman, sir," replied Frances. They shook hands in the dark, and Gerald ran out. Even as he opened the door the storm broke. A violent blast of wind, a blinding flare, a rattling volley of thunder, and down came the rain.

A rush, a roar, the trampling of a thousand horses; and overhead the great guns bellowing, and the flashes coming and going — it was a wild scene. The family had come in, and were all standing in the front hall. All? No, two, only, — Margaret and Miss Sophronia. In the confusion and tumult, the children had escaped, and were gone. Margaret, a little pale, but perfectly composed, met Gerald with a smile, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world for young gentlemen to walk out of the wall. She was supporting Miss Sophronia, who had quite lost her head, and was crying piteously

that they would die together, and that whoever escaped must take her watch and chain back to William. "Poor William, what will become of him and those helpless babes?"

"It's all right, Miss Montfort," said Gerald, cheerfully. "I ran the noise down, and it was the simplest thing in the world. Nothing to be alarmed about, I do assure you; nothing."

"What was it?" asked Margaret, in an undertone.

"I'll tell you by and by," replied the young man, in the same tone. "Not now, please; I promised — somebody. You shall know all in good time."

His look of bright confidence was not to be resisted. Margaret nodded cheerfully, and submitted to be mystified in her own home by an almost total stranger. Indeed, the Voice of Fernley had suddenly sunk into insignificance beside the Voice of Nature. The turmoil outside grew more and more furious. At length a frightful crash announced that the lightning had struck somewhere very near the house. This was the

last straw for poor Miss Sophronia. She fled up-stairs, imploring Gerald and Margaret to follow her. "Let us die together!" she cried. "I am responsible for your young lives; we will pass away in one embrace. The long closet, Margaret! It is our only chance of life, — the long closet!"

The long closet, as it was called, was in reality a long enclosed passage, leading from the Blue Room, where Miss Sophronia slept, to one of the spare chambers beyond. It was a dim place, lighted only by a transom above the door. Here were kept various ancient family relics which would not bear the light of day; a few rusty pictures, some ancient hats, and, notably, a bust of some deceased Montfort, which stood on a shelf, covered with a white sheet, like a half-length ghost. Margaret did not think this gloomy place at all a cheerful place for a nervous woman in a thunder-storm; so, nodding to Gerald to follow, she ran up-stairs. But before she reached the landing, terrific shrieks began to issue from the upper floor; shrieks so agonising, so ear-piercing, that they dominated even

the clamour of the storm. Margaret flew, and Gerald flew after. What new portent was here? Breathless, Margaret reached the door of the long closet. It stood open. On the floor inside crouched Miss Sophronia, uttering the frantic screams which rang through the house. Apparently she had lost the use of her limbs from terror, else she would not have remained motionless before the figure which was advancing towards her from the gloom of the long passage. First a dusky whiteness glimmered from the black of the further end, where the half-ghost sat on its shelf; then gradually the whiteness detached itself, took shape, — if it could be called shape, — emerged into the dim half-light, — came on slowly, silently. Shrouded, like the ghostly bust behind it, tall and slender, with dark locks escaping beneath the hood or cowl that drooped low over its face, — with one hand raised, and pointing stiffly at the unhappy woman, — the figure came on — and on — till it saw Margaret. Then it stopped. Next came in view the bright, eager face of Gerald Merryweather, looking over

Margaret's shoulder. And at that, the spectre began, very slowly, and with ineffable dignity, to retreat.

"Exclusive party," whispered Gerald. "Objects to our society, Miss Montfort. Shall I head him off, or let him go?"

Margaret made no reply; she was bending over the poor lady on the floor, trying to make her hear, trying to check the screams which still rang out with piercing force.

"Cousin Sophronia! Cousin, do stop! Do listen to me! It is a trick, a naughty, naughty trick; nothing else in the world. Do, please, stop screaming, and listen to me. Oh, what shall I do with her?" This remark was addressed to Gerald; but that young gentleman was no longer beside her. He had been keeping his eye on the spectre, which slowly, softly glided back and back, until it melted once more into the thick blackness at the further end. Gerald dodged out into the hall, and ran along the outer passage, to meet, as he expected, the ghost full and fair at the other door. "Run!" cried a small voice. "I'll hold him; run!" Gerald was grasped

A LIVELY GHOST.

once more, this time by a pair of valiant little hands which did their best, and which he put aside very gently, seeing a petticoat beneath them. "You sha'n't catch him!" cried the second spectre, clinging stoutly to his legs.

> "Twice he wrung her hands in twain,
> But the small hands closed again!"

Meantime the spectre-in-chief had darted back into the closed passage. There was a crash. The half-ghost toppled over as he ran against it, and was shivered on the floor, adding another noise to the confusion. The phantom raced along the passage, took a flying leap over Miss Sophronia's prostrate form, revealing, had any looked, an unsuspected blackness of leg beneath the flowing white, and scudded along the square upper hall. By this time Gerald was at his heels again, and a pretty race it was. Round the hall, up the stairs, and round the landing of the attic flight. At the attic door the spectre wavered an instant,—then turned, and dashed down-stairs again. Once more round the upper hall, now down the great front staircase, gathering his

skirts as he went, the black legs now in good evidence, and making wonderful play. A good runner, surely. But the Greyhound was gaining; he was upon him. The phantom gave a wild shriek, gained the front door with one desperate leap, and plunged, followed by his pursuer, into the arms of a gentleman who stood in the doorway, in the act of entering.

"Easy, there!" said Mr. Montfort, receiving pursuer and pursued with impartial calm. "Is it the Day of Judgment, or what?"

CHAPTER XV.

A DEPARTURE.

"I AM extremely sorry, Sophronia, that you were so alarmed last night. I trust you feel no ill effects this morning?"

"Ill effects! My dear John, I am a wreck! Simply a wreck, mentally and physically. I shall never recover from it — never."

"Oh, don't say that, Cousin Sophronia!" exclaimed Margaret, who was really much distressed at all that passed.

"My love, if it is the truth, I must say it. Truth, Margaret, is what I live for. No, I shall never recover, I feel it. My prayer is that these unhappy children may never know that they are the cause of my untimely —"

"Has Basil made his apology?" asked Mr. Montfort, abruptly.

"Yes, John, yes; I am bound to say he has, though he showed little feeling in it.

Not a tenth part so much as little Merton, who was in real sorrow, — actually shed tears, — although he had no hand in the cruel deceit. Ah! Merton is the only one of those children who has any heart."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Montfort, "I didn't know it was as bad as that."

"Quite, I assure you, dearest John. If it were not for my poor William and his children, I should take Merton with me and be a mother to him. His nerves, like mine, are shattered by the terrible occurrences of the last two nights. He was positively hysterical as he pointed out to me — what I had already pointed out to you, Margaret — that the *real thing* had not been explained. I might, in time, live down the effect of those children's wicked jest; but the Voice of Fernley has never been explained, and never will be."

Mr. Montfort pulled his moustache, and looked out of the window, observing the prospect; but Margaret cried:

"Oh, Cousin Sophronia, you are wrong; indeed, indeed you are! Young Mr. Merry-

weather found out all about it last night, only he had not time to tell us. He said it was something perfectly simple, and that there was no need of being alarmed in the least."

"By the way," said Mr. Montfort, "I have a note from the lad this morning. He found some special tools were needed, and went up to town by the early train to see about them. May be gone a day or two, he says. What was the noise like, Margaret?"

Margaret was about to tell all she knew, but Miss Sophronia interrupted. "Spare me, dearest Margaret, spare me the recalling of details. I am still too utterly broken, — I shall faint, I know I shall. John, it was simply the voice that was heard ten, or it may be fifteen years ago, when I was a young girl. You must remember; it is impossible but that you must remember."

"I remember perfectly," said Mr. Montfort. "That was thirty years ago, Sophronia; that was in 1866. Oh, yes, I remember." Again Mr. Montfort became absorbed in the view from the window. His face was very grave; why, then, did the buttons on his waistcoat

shake? "And Master Merton was frightened, was he?" he resumed, presently. "Ha! that looks bad. Good morning, Jones," as a respectable-looking man in livery came up the gravel walk. "A note for me? no answer? thanks." The man touched his hat, and departed; Mr. Montfort opened the pretty, pearl-coloured note, and read, as follows:

"DEAR JOHN:

"Don't punish the children; it was partly my fault, and partly your own. I supposed you expected something to happen, and I thought the old trick would serve as well as a new one.

"As ever,

"E. P."

"Humph!" said Mr. Montfort, twisting the note, and frowning at the window. "Precisely! and so, you were saying, Sophronia — ahem! that is, you are obliged to leave us?"

"Yes, my dearest John, I must go. I could not, no! I could not sleep another night beneath this roof. I have told Willis. I am cut to the heart at leaving you, so helpless, with only this poor child here, and those — those dreadful children of Anthony's. I

would so gladly have made a home for you, my poor cousin. I live only for others; but still it seems my duty *to* live, and I am convinced that another night here would be my death."

"I will not attempt to change your purpose, Sophronia. At the same time I am bound to tell you that — a — that the disturbance of which you speak is of no supernatural kind, but is attributable to — to human agency altogether. If you wish, I will have it looked into at once, or we can wait till young Merryweather comes back. He seemed to know about it, you say, Margaret. And — but at any rate, Sophronia, we can write you the sequel, and, if you feel uneasy, why, as you say — You have ordered Willis? Then I'll go and get some tags for your trunks."

Mr. Montfort retired with some alacrity, and Margaret, with an unexplained feeling of guilt at her heart, offered to help Miss Sophronia with her packing.

An hour later the lady was making her adieux. The carriage was at the door, Willis had strapped on the two trunks, and all was

ready. Mr. Montfort shook his cousin by the hand, and was sorry that her visit had ended in such an untoward manner. Margaret begged Cousin Sophronia's pardon for anything she might have done amiss. Indeed, the girl's heart was full of a vague remorse. She had tried, but she felt that she might have tried harder to make things go smoothly. But Miss Sophronia bore, she declared, no malice to any one.

"I came, dear John, determined to do my best, to be a sister to you in every way; it will always be a comfort to think that I have been with you these two months. It may be that some time, when my nerves are restored, I may be able to come to Fernley again; if you should make any changes, you understand me. Indeed, a complete change, my dear cousin, is the thing I should most recommend. Missing me as you will,—a companion of your own age,—you might still marry, dearest John, you might indeed. Emily—"

"That will do, Sophronia!" said Mr. Montfort, sternly. "Have you everything you want for the journey?"

"Everything, I think, dear John. Ah! well, good-bye, Margaret! It has been a blow to find that you do not love me, my dear, as I have loved you, but we must bear our burdens."

"What do you — what can you mean, Cousin Sophronia?" asked Margaret, turning crimson. "I am sure I have tried — "

"Ah! well, my dear, one gives oneself away," said the lady. "You said in your letter to your cousin, — I recall the precise words — 'I have tried to love her, but I cannot succeed.' Yes; very painful to one who has a heart like mine; but I find so few — "

"Cousin Sophronia," cried the girl, all softer thoughts now merged in a burning resentment. "You — you read my letter, the letter that was on my own desk, in my own room?"

"Certainly, my love, I did. I hope I know something about young girls and their ways; I considered it my duty, my sacred duty, to see what you wrote."

"You seem to know little about the ways of gentle people!" cried Margaret, unable for once to restrain herself. Her uncle laid his

hand on her arm. "Steady, little woman!" he said. His quiet, warning voice brought the angry girl to herself, the more quickly that she knew his sympathy was all with her.

"I—I should not have said that, Cousin Sophronia," she said. "I beg your pardon! Good-bye!"

She could not say more; she stood still, with burning cheeks, while Mr. Montfort helped the lady into the carriage.

"A pleasant journey to you, Sophronia," he said, as he closed the door. "Willis—"

"Good-bye!" cried Miss Sophronia, out of the window. "Bless you, dearest John! Margaret, my love, I shall always think of you most tenderly, believe me, in spite of everything. It is impossible for me to harbour resentment. No, my child, I shall always love you as a sister. I have taken the old vinaigrette with me, as a little souvenir of you; I knew it would give you pleasure to have me use it. Bless you! And, John, if you want me to look up some good servants for you, I know of an excellent woman who would be the very thing—"

"Willis!" said Mr. Montfort again. "You'll miss that train, Sophronia, if you don't, — *bon voyage!*"

Mr. Montfort stood for some seconds looking after the carriage as it drove off; then he drew a long breath, and threw out his arms, opening his broad chest.

"Ha!" said he. "So that is over. Here endeth the — What, crying, May Margaret? Come and sit here beside me, child; or shall we come out and see the roses? Really astonishing to have this number of roses in August; but some of these late kinds are very fine, I think."

Chatting quietly and cheerfully, he moved from one shrub to another, while Margaret wiped her eyes, and gradually quieted her troubled spirit.

"Thank you, Uncle John!" she said, presently. "You know, don't you? You always know, just as papa did. But — but I never heard of any one's doing such a thing, did you?"

"Didn't you, my dear? Well, you see, you didn't know your Cousin Sophronia when she

was a girl. And — let us be just," he added. "You, belonging to the new order, have no idea of what many people thought and did forty years ago. I have no doubt, from my recollection of my Aunt Melissa, Sophronia's mother, that she read all her children's letters. I know she searched my pockets once, thinking I had stolen sugar; I hadn't, that time, and my white rat was in my pocket, and bit her, and I was glad."

Seeing Margaret laugh again, Mr. Montfort added, in a different tone, "And now, I must see those boys."

The children were sent for to the study, where they remained for some time. Basil and Susan D. came out looking very grave; they went up to the nursery in silence, and sat on the sofa, rubbing their heads together, and now and then exchanging a murmur of sympathy and understanding. Merton remained after the others, and when he emerged from the fatal door, he was weeping profusely, and refused to be comforted by Elizabeth; and was found an hour after, pinching Chico's tail, and getting bitten in return. Telling

Margaret about it afterward, Mr. Montfort said:

"Basil and the little girl tell a perfectly straight story. It is just as I supposed; they were trying the old ghost trick that we other boys, your father and Richard and I, Margaret, played on Sophronia years ago. If the thunder-storm had not brought you all upstairs, there would have been some very pretty ghost-gliding, and the poor soul would very likely have been frightened into a real fit instead of an imaginary one. Children don't realise that sort of thing; I certainly did not, nor my brothers; but I think these two realise it now, and they are not likely to try anything of the kind again. As for the noise,—"

"Yes, Uncle John, I am really much more puzzled about that noise, for, of course, I saw the other foolishness with my eyes."

"Well!" said Mr. Montfort, comfortably, "we used to make that noise with a thing we called a roarer; I don't know whether they have such things now. You take a tomato-can, and put a string through it, and then you— It really does make a fine

noise, very much what you describe. Yes, I have that on my conscience, too, Margaret. You see, I told you I knew this kind of child, and so I do, and for good reason. But Basil won't say anything at all about the matter. He says it was not his hunt, and he will tell all that he did, but cannot tell on others; which is entirely proper. But when I turned to that other little scamp, Merton, I could get nothing but floods of tears, and entreaties that I would ask Frances. 'Frances knows all about it!' he said, over and over."

"And have you seen Frances?"

"N — no," replied Mr. Montfort, rather slowly. "I am going to see Frances now."

Accordingly, a few minutes later, Frances, bustling about her kitchen, became aware of her master standing in the doorway. She became aware of him, I say, but it was with "the tail of her eye" only; she took no notice of him, and went on rattling dish-pans at an alarming rate. She appeared to be house-cleaning; at all events, the usually neat kitchen was in a state of upheaval, and the chairs and tables, tubs and clothes-horses,

were so disposed that it was next to impossible for any one to enter. Moreover, Frances apparently had a toothache, for her face was tied up in a fiery red handkerchief; and when Mr. Montfort saw that handkerchief, he looked grave, and hung about the door more like a schoolboy than a dignified gentleman and the proprietor of Fernley House.

"Good morning, Frances," he said at length, in a conciliatory tone.

"Good morning, sir," said Frances; and plunged her mop into a pail of hot water.

"You have a toothache, Frances? I am very sorry."

"Yes, sir, I have; thank you, sir."

"A — Frances — I came to ask if you can tell me anything about the strange noise that frightened the ladies so, last night and the night before."

"No, sir," said Frances. "I can't tell you nothing about it. There do be rats enough in this house, Mr. Montfort, to make any kind of a noise; and I do wish, sir, as the next time you are in town, you would get me a rat-trap as is good for something.

There's nothing but trash, as the rats won't look at, and small blame to them. I can't be expected to do without things to do with, Mr. Montfort, and I was saying so to Elizabeth only this morning."

"I will see to the traps, Frances. But this noise that I am speaking of; Master Merton says —"

"And I was wishful to ask you, sir, if you would please tell Master Merton to keep out of my kitchen, and not come bothering here every hour in the day. The child is that greedy, he do eat himself mostly ill every day, sir, as his father would be uneasy if he knew it, sir. And to have folks hanging round my kitchen when I am busy is a thing I never could abide, Mr. John, as you know very well, sir, and I hope you'll excuse me for speaking out; and if you'd go along, sir, and be so kind, maybe I could get through my cleaning so as to have dinner not above half an hour or so late, though I'm doubtful myself, harried as I have been."

"I really don't see what I am to do with Frances," said Mr. Montfort, as he went back

to his study; "she grows more and more impracticable. She will be giving me notice to quit one of these days, if I don't mind. I am very sure the house belongs to her, and not to me. But, until Master Gerald Merryweather comes back, I really don't see how I am to find out who worked that roarer."

CHAPTER XVI.

PEACE.

Peace reigned once more at Fernley House; peace and cheerfulness, and much joy. It was not the same peace as of old, when Margaret and her uncle lived their quiet tête-à-tête life, and nothing came to break the even calm of the days. Very different was the life of to-day. The peace was spiritual purely, for the lively and varied round of daily life gave little time for repose and meditation, at least for Margaret. She had begun to give the children short but regular lessons in the morning, finding that the day was not only more profitable but pleasanter for them and for all, if it began with a little study. And the lessons were a delight to her. Remembering her struggles with Peggy, — dear Peggy, — it was a joy to teach these young creatures the begin-

nings of her beloved English history, and to see how they leaped at it, even as she herself had leaped so few years ago. They carried it about with them all day. Margaret never knew whom to expect to dinner in these days. Now a scowling potentate would stalk in with folded arms and announce that he was William the Conqueror, and demand the whereabouts of Hereward the Wake (who was pretty sure to emerge from under the table, and engage in sanguinary combat, just after he had brushed his hair, and have to be sent up to the nursery to brush it over again); now a breathless pair would rush in, crying that they were the Princes in the Tower, and would she please save them, for that horrid old beast of a Gloster was coming after them just as fast as he could come. Indeed, Margaret had to make a rule that they should be their own selves, and no one else, in the evening when Uncle John came home, for fear of more confusion than he would like.

"But I get so *used* to being Richard," cried Basil, after a day of crusader-life. "You can't do a king well if you have to keep stopping

and being a boy half the time. Don't you see that yourself, Cousin Margaret?"

Yes, Margaret saw that, but she submitted that she liked boys, and that it was trying for a person in private life, like herself, to live all day in royal society, especially when royalty was so excited as the Majesty of England was at this juncture.

"Oh, but why can't you be some one too, Cousin Margaret? I suppose Susan D. would hate to give up being Berengaria, after you gave her that lovely gold veil — I say, doesn't she look bul— doesn't she look pretty in it? I never thought Susan D. would come out pretty, but it's mostly the way you do her hair — what was I saying, Cousin Margaret? Oh, yes, but there are other people you could be, lots and lots of them. And — Merton doesn't half do Saladin. He keeps getting mad when I run him through the body, and I *can't* make him understand that I don't mean those nasty, fat, black things in ponds, when I call him 'learned leech,' and you know he *has* to be the leech, it says so in the 'Talisman.' And so perhaps you would be Saladin, and he

can be Sir Kenneth, though he's too sneaky for him, too. Or else you could be the hermit, Cousin Margaret. Oh, do be the hermit! Theodoric of Engedi, you know, the Flail of the Desert, that's a splendid one to do. All you have to do is keep jumping about and waving something, and crying out, 'I am Theodoric of Engedi! I am the Flail of the Desert!' Come on, Cousin Margaret, oh, I say, do!" And Susan D., tugging at her cousin's gown, shouted in unison, "Oh, I say, do, Cousin Margaret!"

If any one had told Margaret Montfort, three months before this, that she would, before the end of the summer, be capering about the garden, waving her staff, and proclaiming herself aloud to be the highly theatrical personage described above, she would have opened her eyes in gentle and rather scornful amazement. But Margaret was learning many things in these days, and among them the art of being a child. Her life had been mostly spent with older people; she had never known till now the rapture of being a little girl, a little boy. Now, seeing it in these bright faces, that never

failed to grow brighter at sight of her, she felt the joy reflected in her own face, in her own heart; and it was good to let all the quiet, contained maiden ways go, once in a while, and just be a child with the children, or a Flail of the Desert, as in the present instance.

John Montfort, leaning on the gate, watched the pretty play, well pleased. "They have done her all the good in the world," he said to himself. "It isn't only what she has done for them, bless her, but for her, too, it has been a great thing. I was selfish and stupid to think that a young creature could go on growing to fulness, without other young creatures about it. How will she feel, I wonder, about their going? How would she like—"

At this moment he was discovered by Basil, who charged him with a joyous shout. "Oh, here is Uncle John! Oh, Uncle John, don you want to be Saladin, please? Here's Merton has hurt his leg and gone off in a sulk, and I'll get you a scimetar in a minute — it's the old sickle, and Willis says it's so rusty you can't really do much mis-

"THE 'FLAIL OF THE DESERT.'"

chief with it; and here's the Hermit of Engedi, you know, and he can shout —"

But, alas, for the Lion-hearted! When he turned to summon his hermit, he saw no flying figure, brandishing a walking-stick and crying aloud, but a demure young lady, smoothing her hair hurriedly and shaking out the folds of her dress, as she hastened to meet her uncle.

"Bravo!" said Uncle John. "But why did you stop, Meg? It wouldn't have been the first time I had played Saladin, I assure you!"

"Oh, uncle! I am really too much out of breath to play any more. And besides, it is near tea-time, and the children must go and get ready. I will come in a moment, Susan dear, and do your hair. Are there any letters, Uncle John? Oh, two, from the girls; how perfectly delightful! Oh, I must run up, but we'll read them after tea, shall we, Uncle John?"

"With all my heart, my dear; and I have a letter, too, about which I shall want to consult you. Go now, or Susan D. will be try-

ing to braid her own hair, a thing to be avoided, I have observed."

Tea over, and Mr. Montfort seated at ease with his cigar, the children engaged in an enchanting game of Bat (played with worn-out umbrellas, from which the sticks had been taken: this game is to be highly recommended where there is space for flapping and swooping), Margaret opened her letters; re-opened them, rather, for it must be confessed that she had peeped into both while she was braiding her own hair and changing her dress for the pretty evening gown her uncle always liked to see.

"Peggy is actually off for school, Uncle John. It does not seem possible that we are in September, and the summer really gone. She seems in high spirits over it, dear child. Listen!

"DARLING DEAREST MARGARET:

"I am going to-morrow; I waited till the last minute, so that I could tell you the last of me. My trunk is almost all packed, and I really think I have done it pretty well. Thank you, ever and ever and ever so much, for the nice things to tie up my shoes

in. They are just lovely, and so is the shoe-bag to hang against the wall. I mean to put away every shoe just the very minute I take it off, and not have them kicking about the closet floor at all, ever. And the combing-sack! Oh, Margaret, it is a perfect beauty! Ever so much too pretty to do my hair in, and mother says so, too, but I shall, because you made it for me to, and think of you all the time I am, and —

"I got a little mixed there, but you will know what I mean, dearest Margaret. Tell Uncle John I am so perfectly delighted with the lovely ring, I don't know *what* to *do*. Oh, Margaret, you know how I always wanted a ring, and how I used to admire that sapphire of Rita's; and to think of having a sapphire ring myself — why, I can hardly believe it even now! I couldn't go to sleep for ever so long last night, just watching it in the moonlight. Of course I shall write to Uncle John and thank him myself, but I couldn't wait just to let him know how happy I was. (Margaret, if you think he would like it, or at least wouldn't mind it, you might give him a hug just now and say I sent it, but don't unless you are *perfectly sure* he wouldn't mind, because you know how I *love* Uncle John, even if I am just the least bit afraid of him, and I'm sure that is natural when you think what a goose I am.)"

Margaret paused, laughing, to throw her

arms around her uncle, and tell him that this was "Peggy's hug;" then she went on:

"I was so glad to get your last letter, and to hear all about dear, darling Fernley, and Uncle John, and Elizabeth and Frances, and all the funny things those funny children have been doing. Margaret, they are almost exactly like us children when we were their age. I never began to think about growing up till I read about how they carry on, and then saw that we didn't act so any more, Jean, and Flora, and I. Jean is younger than me, of course, but she's more grown up, I really think. I think you must have a lovely time, now that — well, you said I mustn't call names, and so I won't, but I know just exactly what kind of a person she was, Margaret, and *so do you*, and you can't deny it, so now!

"Margaret, of course I do feel rather scared about school, for I am still very ignorant, and I suppose all the girls will know about forty thousand times as much as I do, and they will call me stupid, and I know I am; but I mean to be brave, and remember all the things you have said, and mother has helped me, too, oh, a lot, and she says she just wishes she had had the chance when she was a girl, and I know now just how she feels. And then when I come home, you see, I can teach the little girls, and that will be great. But I never shall try to teach them spelling, or history, for you know I cannot; and I

cannot remember to this day who Thomas à Bucket was, and why they called him that.

"Hugh came in just now, and I asked him that, and he laughed, and said Thomas à Bucket was certainly pale before they got through with him. I don't know what he means, but he says you will, so I write it down. Good-bye, dearest, darling Margaret. Give heaps and oceans and lots of love to Uncle John, and most of all to your own darling self, from

"PEGGY."

"I wonder how Peggy will get on at school?" said Margaret. "Very well, I should think. Certainly no one can help liking her, dear girl; and she will learn a great deal, I am sure."

"She'll never learn English history," said Mr. Montfort; "but after all, there are other things, May Margaret, though you are loth to acknowledge it."

"And now for Rita. I'll just run through it again, Uncle John, to see — oh! oh, yes! The first part is all just that she wants to see me, and so on, — her wild way. She has had the most wonderful summer, — 'the Pyrenees, Margaret! Never before have I seen great mountains, that scale the heavens, you under-

stand. The Titans are explained to me. I have seen, and my soul has arisen to their height. I could dwell with thee, Marguerite, on snow-peaks tinged with morning rose, peaks that touch the stars, that veil themselves in clouds of evening;' perhaps I'll skip a little here, Uncle John. Interlaken, — the Jungfrau, — oh, she *is* having a glorious time. Oh! oh, dear me, uncle!"

"Well, my dear? She has not fallen off the Jungfrau?"

"No, not that; but she — she is — or she thinks she is — going to be married."

Mr. Montfort whistled. "To the Matterhorn, or to some promising young avalanche? Pray enlighten me, my dear."

"Oh! don't laugh, Uncle John, I am afraid it may be serious. A young Cuban, she says, a soldier, of course." Margaret ran her eyes down the page, but found nothing sober enough to read aloud. "He seems to be a very wonderful person," she said, timidly. "Handsome, and a miracle of courage, — and a military genius; if war should come, Rita thinks he will be commander-in-chief of the

Cuban army. You don't think it will really come to war, Uncle John?"

"I cannot tell, Margaret," said Mr. Montfort, gravely. "Things are looking rather serious, but no one can see just what is coming yet. And this seems to be a bona fide engagement? It isn't little Fernando, is it?"

"No! oh, no! She says — she is sorry for Fernando, but he will always be her brother. This one's name is — let me see. José Maria Salvador Santillo de Santayana. What a magnificent name! He had followed her from Cuba, and he has Uncle Richard's permission to pay his addresses to Rita, and she says — she says he is the dream of her life, embodied in the form of a Greek hero, with the soul of a poet, and the intellect of a Shakespeare. So I suppose it is all right, uncle; only, she is very young."

"Young! My dear child, she was grown up while you were still in the nursery," said Mr. Montfort. "According to Spanish ideas, it is high time for her to be married, and I am sure I wish the dear girl all happiness. We must look over the family trinkets,

Margaret, and find something for our bird of Paradise. There are some pretty bits of jewelry; but that will keep. Now, if you can stop wondering and romancing for a moment, May Margaret, I, too, have a letter, about which I wish to consult you."

"Yes, uncle, oh, yes! I hope he is good as well as handsome, don't you? She says the Santillo nose is the marvel of all Cuba."

"The Santillo nose may be pickled in brine, my dear, for ought I care; I really want your attention, Margaret, and you must come down from the clouds. Here is Anthony Montfort writing for his children."

"*What!*" cried Margaret, waking suddenly from her dream. "What did you say about the children, Uncle John? Cousin Anthony writing for them? What can you mean?"

"Why, my love, I mean writing for them," said Mr. Montfort, calmly. "He is, you may remember, a relation of theirs, a father in point of fact. He has found an excellent opening in California, and means to stay there. He says — I'll read you his letter, or the part of it that relates to the children.

Hum — 'grateful to you' — ha! yes, here it is. 'Of course I must make some arrangement about the children. One of the boys can come to me, but I cannot take care of both, so Basil will have to go to boarding-school, and Susan D., too. If you would be so good as to look up a good school or two, I should be ever so much obliged. Basil can take care of himself, you'll only have to consign and ship him; perhaps you can get some one to go with the little girl, and see to her things and all that. It's a shame to call upon you,' — h'm! so forth! Well, Meg, what do you say?"

But Margaret said nothing. She was sitting with her hands fallen on her lap, gazing at her uncle with a face of such piteous consternation that he had much ado to keep his countenance.

"Take them away!" she faltered, presently. "Take away — my children? Oh, Uncle John!"

Mr. Montfort looked away, and smoked awhile in silence, giving the girl time to collect herself. Margaret struggled with the

tears that wanted to rush to her eyes. She forced herself to take up the letters that lay in her lap and fold them methodically. When he saw that her hands trembled less, Mr. Montfort said, quietly, "The children have been a great deal of care to you, Margaret; but you have grown fond of them, I know, and so have I. I think a good deal of your judgment, my dear, young as you are. What would you like best to have done about the little people? Take time; take time! Anthony practically leaves the whole matter in my hands. In fact, I think he is puzzled, and feels perhaps that he has not done as well as he might for them always. Take time, my child."

"Oh, I don't need any time, Uncle John!" cried Margaret, trying to speak steadily. "I — I didn't realise, I suppose — it has all come about so gradually — I didn't realise all that they were to me. To lose Basil and Susan D., — I don't see how I can let them go, uncle; I don't indeed. You won't think me ungrateful, will you, dear? I was, oh, so happy, before they came; but now — they

are so dear, so dear! and — and Susan D. is used to me, and to have her go to a stranger who might not understand the poor little shut-up nature — oh, how can I bear it? how can I bear it?"

"Well, my dear," said Mr. Montfort, comfortably. "How if you did not have to bear it?"

Then, as Margaret raised her startled eyes to his, he went on, in the kind, steady tone that always brought quiet and peace with it.

"How if we made the present arrangement — part of it, at least — permanent? Let Merton go to his father; I should not care to have the bringing up of Merton. But there is an excellent school near here, on the island, to which Basil could go, staying the week and coming home here for Sunday; and if little Susan would not be too much care for you, — she's a dear little girl, once you get through the prickles, — why, May Margaret, it seems to me — "

But Mr. Montfort got no further; for here was Margaret sobbing on his breast as if

she were Rita herself, and calling him the best and dearest and kindest, and telling him that she was so happy, so happy; and that was why she was crying, only she could not stop; and so on and so on, till Uncle John really thought he should have to send for Frances. At his suggesting this, however, Margaret laughed through her tears, and presently struggled into something like composure.

"And, after all," said Mr. Montfort, "how do you know the children will want to stay with you, you conceited young woman?"

"Oh, Uncle John! I will teach Susan D. all I know, and a great deal more, I hope, for I shall be learning all the time now, if I have another coming after me. And we will keep house together, and it will be like the little sister, like little Penelope, Uncle John. And then to have Basil coming home every week, all full of school, and fun, and noise,— why, how perfectly delightful it will be! And I will not let them overrun you, dear uncle; they have been good lately, haven't they?"

"They have been extremely good, my dear. All the same, I think you would do well to interview them on the subject, before you prepare all your chickens for the market. See, there are your two coming up the walk this moment. You might go — "

But Margaret was already gone. Mr. Montfort watched her light figure flying down the walk, and thought she had grown almost back into a child again, since the children came. "And yet all a woman," he said; "all a sweet, wholesome, gentle woman. See her now with her arms around the child; the little creature clings to her as if she were the mother it never knew. Ah! she is telling them. No need to smother her, children. I never really meant to separate you; no, indeed. I only wanted you to find out for yourselves, as I have found out for myself. No more solitude at Fernley, please God; from now on, young faces and hearts, and sunshine, and a home; the future instead of the past."

The good man laid down his cigar, quietly and carefully, as he did everything, and

opened his arms as the three, Margaret and her children, came flying towards him; and they ran into those kind strong arms and nestled there, and looked into his eyes and knew that they were at home.

THE END.

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